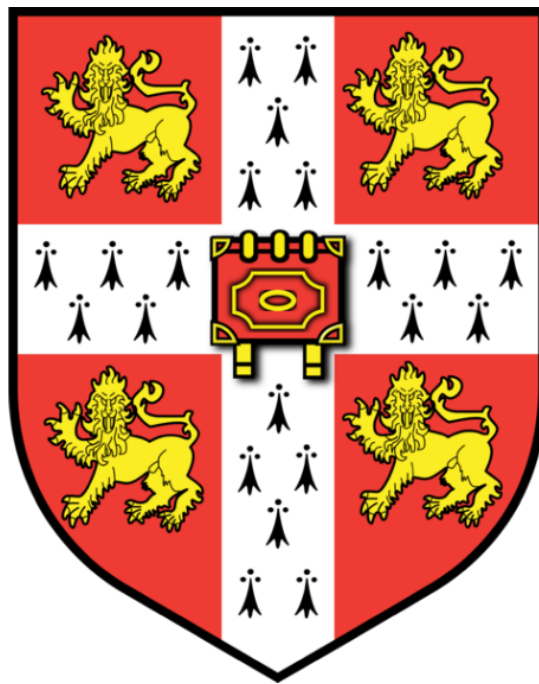


# Inviting the Other

An ethnographically-informed social history of  
Sat Tal Christian Ashram

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## DECLARATION

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

This dissertation does not exceed the word limit stipulated by the degree committee of the Faculty of Divinity.





## ABSTRACT

### **Inviting the Other: An ethnographically-informed social history of Sat Tal Christian Ashram**

Nadya Anastasia Pohran

In 1930 the American Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones, along with two other individuals, founded Sat Tal Christian Ashram (STA) in the foothills of northern India. Using motifs of what was later to be termed ‘inculturation’, Jones envisioned STA as a place that was both “truly Christian and truly Indian” and actively sought to model and impart a Christ-centered spirituality that was not bound to Westernised institutional Christianity. Based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I present a social history of STA, highlighting pre-1947, 1991-present, and 2003-present as crucial timeframes which reveal distinct aspects of the intrapersonal tensions and interpersonal negotiations that play out in the ethnographic terrain of STA. The particular qualitative data which my informants shared with me was granted, I argue, on account of the ways I consciously positioned myself as both an academic researcher and a genuine spiritual seeker. Thus, Chapter 1 interrogates the standard practice of ‘methodological bracketing’ during ethnographic fieldwork, and instead offers Belief-Inclusive Research as a possible and potentially worthwhile research stance for anthropologists of religion. Chapter 2 sketches the necessary historical and political contexts to situate Jones’s model of STA in light of the commonly-held assumption within Indian public spheres that Christianity is exclusively a religion of foreigners. Chapter 3 provides biographical materials about Jones and summarises some of the influences, both personal-theological and socio-political, which inspired him to create STA. Through outlining some of the key spiritual visions he had for STA, we see that Jones associated Indianness with a very particular strand of Hinduism—one heavily-inflected by Brahmanical idioms and Advaita Vedanta philosophies. Chapter 4 contextualises and summarises a crucial shift that occurred at STA in 1991: a ‘School of Evangelism’ (SoE) was formed which attracted individuals from low-caste backgrounds who had recently converted from Hinduism. I explore this shift in light of the ashram that Jones had originally conceptualised, and I then demonstrate some of the ways that the SoE can be understood as a disjuncture. Chapter 5 explores some of the relational dynamics between STA and a group which I refer to as ‘World Amrita’ (WA), which started coming to STA in 2003. I consider WA’s presence through the lens of ‘multiple religious belonging’ and reflect on the relational dynamics between STA and WA in light of Jones’s expressed desire for all individuals to be welcomed at the ashram, regardless of faith affiliation. Ultimately, I present STA, along with all of its smaller facets which this thesis has explored and contextualised within broader sociopolitical and historical frameworks, as a microcosm through which we can gain further insights about the at-times complicated processes of inviting and integrating others into our midst.

# CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION .....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>A NOTE ON PSEUDONYMS AND TITLES .....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>CHAPTER 0: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
0.1. SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS.....	4
0.2. CONTEXTUALISING “INVITING THE OTHER” IN EXISTING ACADEMIC LITERATURE.....	7
0.3. BLURRING BOUNDARIES AND BORDERS.....	9
0.4. THREE DIALOGICAL ENCOUNTERS .....	12
<b>CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO BELIEF-INCLUSIVE RESEARCH.....</b>	<b>16</b>
1.1. INTRODUCTION .....	16
1.2. METHODOLOGICAL BRACKETING: JUSTIFICATIONS AND “INTRINSIC” LIMITATION.....	26
1.3. TWO ADDITIONAL LIMITATIONS TO METHODOLOGICAL BRACKETING .....	30
1.4. LIMITING ACCESS TO QUALITATIVE DATA .....	34
1.5. ADOPTING A BELIEF-INCLUSIVE RESEARCH POSTURE.....	42
1.6. CONCLUSION: ARTICULATING SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF BIR .....	44
<b>CHAPTER 2: FOREIGNNESS OR INDIANNESS? INDIGENISATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA.....</b>	<b>49</b>
2.1. INTRODUCTION .....	49
2.2. ASSOCIATING CHRISTIANITY WITH FOREIGNNESS.....	54
2.3. EXPRESSIONS OF INCULTURATED CHRISTIANITY BEFORE STA (PRE-1930).....	66
2.4. CONCLUSION .....	77
<b>CHAPTER 3: THE ORIGINS OF SAT TAL CHRISTIAN ASHRAM AND E. STANLEY JONES’S “ASHRAM IDEALS” ...</b>	<b>80</b>
3.1. DR. E. STANLEY JONES: THE FOUNDER OF SAT TAL CHRISTIAN ASHRAM .....	80
3.2. THE QUEST FOR THE “TRULY CHRISTIAN AND TRULY INDIAN” AT STA .....	90
3.3. ETHNOGRAPHIC MOMENTS: THE QUOTIDIAN CONTESTATIONS OVER “TRULY CHRISTIAN AND TRULY INDIAN” .....	105
3.4. “ALL WHO SINCERELY DESIRE TO FIND GOD” .....	114
3.5. “BECOMING THE ANSWER” BY LIVING OUT A MINIATURE KINGDOM OF GOD.....	114
3.6. CONCLUSION .....	116
<b>CHAPTER 4: THE SCHOOL OF EVANGELISM AND ITS CHALLENGE TO THE IDEAL OF “TRULY CHRISTIAN AND TRULY INDIAN” .....</b>	<b>118</b>
4.1. INTRODUCTION .....	118
4.2. CONTEXTUALISING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SoE WITHIN ITS SOCIO-POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS .....	121
4.3. DISJUNCTURES ON-THE-GROUND .....	127
4.4. CONCLUSION .....	148
<b>CHAPTER 5: THE NEGOTIATIONS OF BELONGING: RELATIONAL DYNAMICS OF WORLD AMRITA AND SAT TAL CHRISTIAN ASHRAM .....</b>	<b>151</b>
5.1. INTRODUCTION .....	151
5.2. MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS BELONGING.....	154
5.3. THE RELATIONAL DYNAMICS OF STA AND WA IN TERMS OF MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS BELONGING .....	161
5.4. NEGOTIATING BELONGING: A CONTINUUM OF PHASES.....	162

5.5. EXPERIENCING PARTIAL BELONGING .....	173
5.6. CONCLUSION .....	181
<b>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>183</b>
6.1. SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS .....	185
6.2. IDEALS AS FUNCTIONAL DIRECTIONAL MARKERS .....	186
6.3. SELF-OTHER DYNAMICS .....	188
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1: KEY HINDI TERMS AND THEIR ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS.....</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2: SOCIAL MAPPING .....</b>	<b>203</b>

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My parents and siblings—as well as my friends who feel just as close as family—have been wonderfully supportive throughout my life, and their love throughout this particular period of my life has been just as constant, unrelenting, and life-giving. But my Babcia is a particularly noteworthy role model of what it can look like to be loving and welcoming in the midst of hardship, difficulties, and differences—and so it seems only fitting that a work devoted to exploring the motivations (and challenges!) of belonging would gesture specifically back to her. A gracious, graceful, and soft-spoken yet stubborn matriarch, my Babcia has cheered me on and cheered me up when I have felt physically or existentially tired; she has also encouraged me to strive to do my best, to prioritise my own mental and physical well-being, to be open to difference, and to act with kindness and generosity towards others. Babcia, I am forever grateful for your love, and I admire the way you live your life. *Istniejemy na tyle, na ile kochamy*.

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## A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

Whenever the original wording seemed to contain nuances that could not be adequately expressed in translation, I have provided the original Hindi alongside my translation—either in-text for short phrases or specific words, or in the footnotes for longer sections. In order to allow for fluid reading for an English-language audience, I have not used the Devanagari script; further, when transliterating Hindi words into Roman script, I have avoided diacritical marks entirely and rendered all words to a purposely-simple phonetic spelling. In such cases, the long vowel (e.g. usually rendered “*ā*” in the case of आ) is here represented by “aa,” and so forth. There is one exception to this: I use a macron on p.57 in my discussion of the words *maari* and *maari*, simply to highlight the fact that (at least to an ear accustomed to the nuances of Indian-language pronunciations) they are indeed two distinct words.

I have provided a list of key Hindi terms along with their translations in Appendix 1.

## A NOTE ON PSEUDONYMS AND TITLES

I have used pseudonyms for every individual mentioned in this thesis other than the individuals who work for STA in an official, long-term capacity, and whose names are thus already publicly associated with STA on various brochures, websites, and written works.

Apart from the pseudonyms themselves, I refer to individuals by the titles that I addressed them with while living at STA. Generally, my choice to use an honorific (“Auntie,” “Acharya,” “Mr.” etc.) was in keeping with what I generally do in other social situations in India: when an individual is noticeably older than me, I refer to them as “Uncle” or “Auntie” unless they explicitly tell me otherwise. Thus, we will see in this thesis, I refer to “Auntie Eileen,” “Uncle William,” “Acharya Ghosh,” “Mr. Das,” and so forth. But Vijay and Lillian (both of whom vehemently rejected my use of “Uncle”/ “Mr.” or “Auntie”/ “Ms.”) are referred to by their first names even though they are older than me. Individuals who were closer to my age (or younger than me) such as Suhasini, Vihaan, and others, are referred to on a first-name basis.

I have provided a social map of all of the individuals and their affiliations in Appendix 2.

## Chapter 0: INTRODUCTION

When my friends and family members hear that my thesis is about concepts such as *invitation*, *interreligious relations* and *belonging*, they often respond to my cursory summary of my research questions with their own queries. “So what’s the solution?”, they ask—sometimes warily, sometimes eagerly. “What works and what doesn’t?” and “Have you found an answer for what people should do in order to get along with one another?” While, admittedly, the task-oriented and solution-driven side of me delights in such inquiries, this thesis does not seek to provide straightforward solutions and well-crafted answers. What I offer, instead, is a detailed, nuanced, and contextualised exploration of the ways that these philosophical questions regarding interpersonal relations, communitarian dynamics, and existential belongings have played out in several on-the-ground scenarios within my ethnographic fieldsite—across various socio-political contexts—since it was established in 1930. In the midst of exploring the ways that *invitation* plays out on-the-ground, I offer up-close examinations of some of the tensions, ambiguities, struggles, negotiations, and resolutions of my fieldsite—microprocesses which are woven together and, acting like a thread, which subsequently stitch together our broader story of *invitation*. In this work, I often unravel this thread—not with the aim to rip apart the seams of the story, but to instead highlight the ways that the process of *invitation* is, in turn, comprised of multiple microprocesses. In describing the multiple layers, expressions, and processes of *invitation*, I offer new and nuanced understandings of the concepts of otherness, belonging, and belief/doubt.

Sat Tal Christian ashram (henceforth “STA”), was established by the American Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973) in 1930 in northern India. Using motifs of what was later to be termed “inculturation,” Jones envisioned STA as a place that was both “truly Christian and truly Indian,” and he actively sought to impart a Christ-centered spirituality that would not be bound to Westernised institutional Christianity. Jones also desired STA to be a place where people from all religious backgrounds (or, as he carefully specified, even from “no religion”) could participate together in a spiritual community which would, he articulated, act as a miniature Kingdom of God. Based on a close reading of Jones’s published writings, archival work, and several months of ethnographic fieldwork in India, I present a social history of STA while engaging with philosophical questions such as: “What are the motivations and challenges of being part of a community in which people believe and act in ways that are



different than you?” “What does it look like to invite (religious, social, doctrinal) others into one’s midst?” and “How does one navigate the existential challenges and the interpersonal processes of belonging to a community that is notably different than oneself?”

This social history can be understood, firstly, to demonstrate several ways in which STA is a site of *transitional and developmental sociality*: we see that identities such as “Christian” and “Indian” are formed, contested, and occasionally reworked on the ground through complex, ever-developing processes. Indeed, STA—and all of the individuals past and present who comprise its sociality—is not only the product of Jones’s own transitions regarding his views of Christ and Christianity (theological transitions which, as we shall explore, were themselves the result of social interactions that Jones had with other individuals, mostly in India), but STA has itself undergone several distinct transitions over the decades following its establishment—each of these transitions have transformed the social systems and social interactions that occur at STA. As we shall see in Chapter 3, Jones’s own understanding of what is signified by “Christian” underwent multiple shifts throughout his career as a missionary which impacted the ways that he sought to fashion STA as an environment that would be “truly Christian and truly Indian.” Further, as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, STA itself, more broadly, experienced several shifts in the decades after Jones’s death in 1973, due to its development of the School of Evangelism (henceforth “SoE”) and its relational negotiations with a group which I call World Amrita (henceforth “WA”). Clearly, STA does not work with a static, monolithic understanding of communal and personal identities such as “Christian,” and throughout this thesis we shall see some of the various ways that STA’s social systems are fluid, processive, and changing.

A second lens through which we will explore STA’s social history is by focusing on its *embodied sociality*. As we shall see, STA is over-flowing with embodied gestures and corporeal practices which are used for communication between its social members. Through considering the diverse embodied interactions that occur at STA—such as the three-fingered “Jesus is Lord” gesture that individuals use to greet each other, the *shramdaan* (work period), the eating of vegetarian food, or physical postures of meditation—all of which we will explore in more detail in subsequent chapters—we see that these somatic practices play crucial roles in establishing and communicating an individual’s place within STA’s social settings. Furthermore, as we shall see in Chapter 3, in the earliest years of STA, certain embodied gestures—including some of those mentioned above—played a key role in forming STA as a sociocultural environment which could effectively invite the other into its midst. Yet, as time

went on and as the social demographics of STA underwent significant changes, some of these embodied dimensions of life at STA were cast aside as spiritually irrelevant or unimportant; as we shall see in Chapter 4, individuals' participation (or lack thereof) in some of these corporeal practices can be explored to better understand the ways that people at STA conceptualise—and actively perform—their identities as Christians and Indians in the present day. As we shall see in Chapter 5, some of the decisions surrounding these present-day relational dynamics are shaped by active contestations over the corporeal practices of individuals and groups who visit STA. Voicing their hesitation and concerns about WA's presence, some members of STA ask questions such as: "In what style do they worship?", "Which meditative postures do they use?" and so on. Many such social interactions, and the decisions surrounding them, are indelibly linked to embodied sociality.

As we consider the *transitional* and *embodied* elements of the sociality of STA, we should also keep in mind that STA, as an active site of social history, should be understood *synergistically*. To be certain, the multitude of mundane interactions which occur at STA, when considered as a complex whole—that is, as processes embedded in various sociohistorical and ideological backdrops—is greater than the sum of its parts. It is only through excavating the sedimented layers of the complex past and present sociopolitical and historical contexts of STA—the presences of colonial powers and the acts of anticolonial resistance, the self-organisation of right-wing Hindu sociopolitical movements, the representations and practices of Christian evangelists, the increasing self-assertion and vocalisations of Dalits and other oppressed milieus, and so forth—that we can gain a more nuanced and deepened understanding of present-day life at STA. Taking into account this degree and depth of contextualisation, STA becomes something like—to borrow a rich metaphor from Hindu contexts—the mouth of the infant Krishna: though small enough to be viewed at a single glance, it simultaneously contains and encapsulates the entire universe. STA, then, can be understood as a *microcosm* through which we can gain insights about certain *macro* philosophical questions relating to self-and-other dynamics which undergird this work.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, through deeply studying the social micro-history of STA *synergistically* along with all its conceptual intricacies and sociopolitical specificities, we can make use of STA as a particular, nuanced vantage point from which we can consider broader discussions about the contested processes of inviting religious others into our midst.

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<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*; Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

## 0.1. SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

In order to make sense of STA as a microcosm, we must first familiarise ourselves with its frames of social reference. Accordingly, Chapters 1 and 2 offer crucial contexts to situate and understand Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Because the qualitative data on which Chapters 3 to 5 are founded was, of course, filtered through the wondrously and wonderfully subjective processes involved in ethnographic fieldwork, I first outline the methodological and theoretical contexts within which I operated. Most crucially, I argue that the qualitative data which my informants at STA shared with me was granted because of the ways I consciously positioned myself as both an academic researcher and a spiritual seeker while conducting my fieldwork. Thus, Chapter 1 interrogates the ethnographic practice of “methodological bracketing” and consequently offers Belief-Inclusive Research (henceforth “BIR”) as a potentially fruitful research stance. BIR is, in effect, an intentional decision not only to be self-reflexive, but also to *include* one’s religious beliefs (along with one’s doubts) throughout the processes of fieldwork. I submit that my conscious adoption of BIR is linked to the particular types and depths of qualitative data that my informants shared with me. Chapter 2 sketches some rather different contexts that link more thematically to the topics explored in subsequent chapters: it outlines some sociopolitical histories in Indic contexts during Portuguese and British periods of colonial rule (roughly 1498-1947) so as to situate Jones’s vision of “inculturated Christianity” against the backdrop of “foreign Christianity.” Due to the ways that some individuals who were associated with European colonial powers consistently sought to remove any traces of Hinduism from Indian Christian communities, and instead strove to impart their respective own Eurocentric practices of Christianity to the Indians whom they encountered, Christianity had gained a reputation within broader Indian public spheres of being a religion exclusively of foreigners. It was against this notion of “foreignness” that Jones, along with some other Christians—both foreign missionaries and Indian Christians alike—consciously began to enact and encourage forms of Christianity which were not “foreign” but which rather actively embraced and incorporated Indian cultural idioms. Importantly, Chapter 2 also outlines some movements of inculturation which pre-date Jones’s establishment of STA.

With these wider sociohistorical contexts in mind, Chapters 3 to 5 focus specifically on the fieldsite of STA itself, both chronologically and thematically. Chapter 3 focuses primarily on Jones’s original visions and aims for STA (established in 1930) to be a place of open dialogue and spiritual exploration for all individuals, while still being both “truly Christian and truly Indian.” Jones penned his “Ashram Ideals” in 1930, and some of the sentiments from it

have been carved, quite literally, into stone: a few large marble plaques which hang outside the main building of STA proclaim that “Jesus Christ is the Guru of the ashram but men [*sic*] of all faiths and of no faith are welcome to share this kingdom of God fellowship.” Another plaque reads, “All who sincerely desire to find God are welcome.” Chapter 3 also provides biographical material about Jones, including some of the key influences which inspired him to establish STA and, more broadly, some of the theological convictions which shaped his missionary efforts. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 then present two distinctive variations on how Jones’s foundational visions have been variously received, rejected, or reworked at STA. Chapter 4 explores some crucial disjunctures that materialised at STA during the 1990s through the formation of the SoE in 1991, when the ashram began to position itself as a training school for evangelists, aspiring theologians, and any other individuals who were new to—or interested in—the basic tenets of Christian doctrine. STA now experienced a marked increase in attendance of individuals from low-caste Hindu backgrounds. This demographic presented a sharp contrast to the educated, high-caste Brahmins whom Jones had envisioned as coming to participate in interreligious dialogue sessions and spiritual community at STA; Chapter 4 thus highlights some vital differences in spiritual orientation between Jones’s Brahmin Hindus and the low-caste students of the SoE, as well as some differences between SoE students and teachers. Chapter 5 explores some of the relational dynamics between STA and WA, an interreligious meditation group which first came to STA in 2003 and is the only non-Christian group who attends the ashram on an annual basis.<sup>2</sup> These relational dynamics prompt us to explore the various practical challenges faced by both parties, as STA seeks to open up their institutional spaces to WA, and as WA navigates the processes of belonging there. I consider WA’s presence through the lens of recent scholarship on “multiple religious belonging,” and reflect on WA’s somewhat agonistic relationship with STA in the light of Jones’s desire for all individuals to be welcomed at STA, regardless of their faith affiliations. Crucially, using the WA-STA dynamic as a case study, Chapter 5 argues that some fundamental assumptions within much of the current scholarship on “multiple religious belonging” need to be reconsidered and given further nuance in the light of the ground realities of navigating belonging in such contexts.

We will encounter a number of people throughout this thesis—some of who work in STA in some capacity, others who are long-term ashramites of STA and attend its Winter and Summer programmes, and yet others who come to STA for different purposes. To enable the

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<sup>2</sup> As I will clarify in Chapter 5, WA is not technically the only non-Christian group hosted by the ashram.

reader to keep track of them, I have provided a social map in Appendix 2 which may prove useful throughout Chapters 3 to 5.

I do not cover all the decades which have unfolded at STA since its establishment in 1930. There are a couple of pragmatic reasons for this: firstly, I could not possibly do justice to a period of 90 years within the methodological confines of a PhD thesis; and, secondly, even if I had enough space to engage with that vast scope of micro-history, the available data on STA between 1940-1990 is scarce, and to attempt to document these decades would be stretching the limits of credible research.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, I concentrate on three distinct yet overlapping time periods of STA: pre-Independence (pre-1947), 1991-present, and 2003-present, which are taken up in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, respectively. My punctuation of the timeline with these specific markers is therefore a heuristic device which allows me to concentrate on and discuss certain distinctive shifts of focus which have occurred at STA. As with any effort to categorise living streams of historical processes, my delineation of the timeline is somewhat inadequate, because such clear delineations almost always make temporal periods seem more clean-cut than they are in real life. This messiness of everyday sociality is why I have insisted on working with three temporal periods which, though distinct, all come forward into the present day. To be clear: although Chapter 3 focuses on Jones's original visions for STA, Chapter 4 focuses on the SoE, and Chapter 5 sketches the relational dynamics between WA and STA, each of these transitions remain operative in the present day. Importantly, in attempting to understand life at STA in the 1930s and the 1990s, I draw upon not only oral histories and interviews, but also participant observation that I conducted during my ethnographic fieldwork (2016-2018). In other words, I sometimes draw upon STA's Winter Programme 2016, or the SoE 2016 programme in attempt to imaginatively envision what the respective programmes would have been like in the 1930s and 1990s. Thus, my temporal model relies crucially on a conception of time as fluid, albeit punctuated by specific disjunctures: as I understand and interpret STA's social history, earlier features of STA are not entirely lost when new features are introduced. Rather than replacing earlier aspects of ashram life, new aspects are densely layered on to the previously existing ones—not unlike the impasto technique in oil painting, in which thick layers of paint are added on top of what is already on

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<sup>3</sup> Jones was denied a visa by the British government in 1939 due to his perceived affiliation with, and support of, India's independence efforts. Thus, unable to enter India in the 1940s, Jones spent most of his time during this decade in the USA. One of his biographers, his granddaughter Anne Mathews-Younes, refers to these decades as "the transplanting decades," and documents the various ways that Jones began to establish Christian ashrams in the USA during that time period. Mathews-Younes, *A History of the Christian Ashrams*. See also Haskell Khan, "The India Mission Field in American History, 1919-1947," 228.

the canvas; often, glimpses of an earlier layer come through the top layer while, conversely, the added layer becomes fundamentally changed due to the persistence of what came before it. And, as I have already stated and shall reiterate, the establishment of STA itself must, in turn, be understood synergistically within the contexts of its sociopolitical histories.

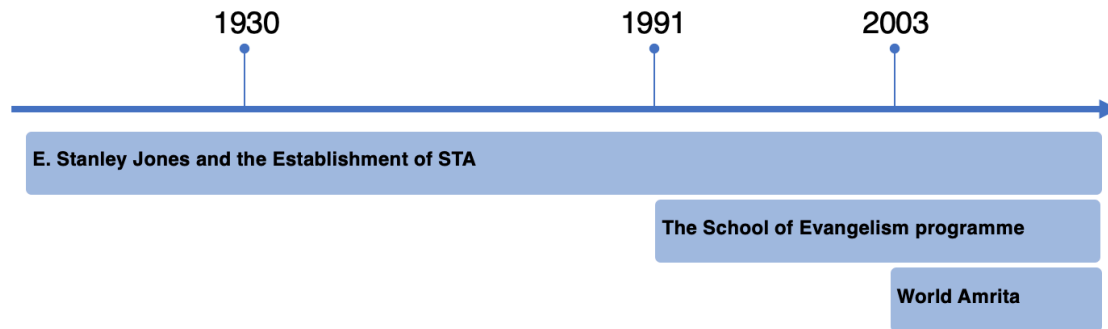


Figure 1: Temporal model of STA

## 0.2. CONTEXTUALISING “INVITING THE OTHER” IN EXISTING ACADEMIC LITERATURE

It is also helpful to contextualise this project within some broader scholarly fields of study. As an ethnographically-informed social history of a Christian ashram in northern India, this work contributes new ethnographic material and sociohistorical data to the field of Indian Christianity by shedding light on a fieldsite which is relatively unaddressed in the existing scholarship. Some scholarly works have indeed been written about Jones and his approach to evangelism in a general sense, but they do not consistently situate his evangelical approach in the historical contexts which preceded it, nor do they extensively draw upon ethnographic fieldwork at STA itself—both of which are carefully contextualised throughout this thesis. Based on the most recent national census (2011), Christians constitute less than 3% of India’s population.<sup>4</sup> Given this demographic, and keeping in mind the rich diversity of religious traditions throughout India’s many cultures, it is not altogether surprising that relatively little scholarship has focused on Indian Christianity. Some of this scholarship is discussed in Chapter 2 and the reader may note there that the relatively small canon of scholarship on Indian Christianity seems to focus predominantly on one or more of three sub-fields: Syrian Christianity, Advaita-inflected Christianity, and Dalit Christianity. This thesis engages with

<sup>4</sup> “India Has 79.8% Hindus, 14.2% Muslims, Says 2011 Census Data on Religion.”

these in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 respectively and thus acts as a sort of conceptual bridge between the studies of these diverse expressions of Indian Christianity.

It seems particularly fitting to consider this work—focused on one specific Christian ashram—in the context of existing studies of the various Christian ashrams and other attempts at inculturation in present-day India. Falling under the umbrella of this scholarship, the works of Kerry San Chirico, Darren Todd Duerksen, and Israel Selvanayagam are especially worth mentioning.<sup>5</sup> Their erudite studies of what we can broadly understand as expressions of inculturation in present-day India have been illuminating and helpful for me as I conceptualised and conducted my own research. And yet, as I note in more detail in Chapter 4, Christian ashrams are, for the most part, suffering from a declining attendance in Indian spaces<sup>6</sup>, and several once-vibrant Christian ashrams have either closed down completely or instigated significant changes in the content and purpose of their institutional presences. In the light of what seems to be a general decline of scholarly and spiritual interest in Christian ashrams, we might ask the question (as some of my colleagues have, rather pointedly, put to me throughout the course of this research): “Why study a phenomenon that is already on the decline?” That is, why look at Christian ashrams, and why not, instead, focus one’s efforts at understanding a different facet of Indian Christianity—one which is gaining momentum and rapidly growing in numbers? To this legitimate query, I respectfully point out, first, that a declining phenomenon mandates urgent study if we wish to better understand it before it either becomes transformed beyond recognition or dies out completely. And, second, one needs only to open an introductory history textbook to highlight the multiple ways that understanding the past can help us to navigate the present. That being said, STA, despite its at-times shaky financial situations, does not seem to be under any immediate threat of becoming an outdated relic: as a multi-faceted and multi-operational institution, it is still alive and well. But, undeniably and unsurprisingly, it too has undergone significant transformations since its establishment in 1930, and our close-up examinations of some of these transformative processes will help us to map out STA as a social site which is shaped by dynamic processes of self-other entanglements.

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<sup>5</sup> San Chirico, “Khrist Bhaktas: Catholics and the Negotiation of Devotion”; Duerksen and Dyrness, *Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context*; Selvanayagam, *Kristu Bhakti and Krishna Bhakti: A Christian-Hindu Dialogue Contributing to Comparative Theology*.

<sup>6</sup> During the aforementioned “transplanting decade” (see footnote #2) of the 1940s, Jones “transplanted” Christian ashrams into USA soil. Today, there remain several ashrams in the USA and Canada which point back to Jones as their founder; many of these North American Christian ashrams fall under the umbrella organisation of the E. Stanley Jones foundation which is operated by Jones’s granddaughter.

We could also consider the question, “why now?” That is, out of the inexhaustible topics that could be pursued in the present academic settings, why *now* pose questions of interreligious relations and existential belonging? As suggested by its title, this thesis is undeniably concerned with the motifs of invitation and otherness. But we can alternately articulate this thematic focus by invoking the terminologies of borders and boundaries. Late-modern, 20-21<sup>st</sup> century societies are rife with examples of the age-old human preoccupation with borders and boundaries: current global news routinely documents the various proclamations of building walls, raising the drawbridge, strengthening borders, reinforcing the bonds of the “us” against the “them,” and delineating boundaries. And the central motif of understanding the Self in relationship to one’s own Otherness has had significant philosophical attention devoted to it.<sup>7</sup> With this zeitgeist in mind, I believe that the present constitutes a crucial moment to look closely at a particular fieldsite whose inhabitants, as we shall see, are preoccupied with these very questions of the bonds of the community, the boundaries of the self, and the borders of the other.

### 0.3. BLURRING BOUNDARIES AND BORDERS

We can, I propose, simultaneously consider these themes of otherness, bonds, boundaries, borders, and delineations with reference not just—as we shall see in the social history of STA—to societies and individuals, but also to scholarly disciplines. Throughout this thesis, I am not only drawing upon overlapping fields of scholarship—Hindu-Christian studies, Anthropology of Christianity, Indian Christianity, interreligious relations, and the like—but also I am intentionally inhabiting an “in-between” space when it comes to the academic disciplines of cultural anthropology and philosophical theology. From early on in my PhD process, I seemed to be configuring in my research an eclectic mix of the two disciplines; I felt “interstitial” (from the Latin *interstitium*—meaning “to stand between”) in the sense that I occupied the liminal spaces between anthropology and theology. To borrow from Merriam Webster’s dictionary definition of “interstitial,” I felt that I was “situated within but not restricted to or characteristic of” both disciplines.

On one side, my methodological approach was vitally informed by the influences of cultural anthropology—indeed, of the two disciplines, it is cultural anthropology, not theology, within which I have been formally trained and with which I am more familiar. Among cultural

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<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.



anthropologists, the ethnographic tools of interviews, participant observation, and researcher participation are usually used in order to understand the nuances of the beliefs and the practices of a particular community—tools which I, of course, used throughout my fieldwork. (I provide more details about my methodology below.) Anthropologists use these fine-grained tools to gain an empathetic understanding of a community's practices and motivations. Through employing other conceptual tools such as cultural relativity, the anthropologist brings these insights back into everyday contexts which their readers can understand or relate to, thus transforming “the strange” into “the familiar.”<sup>8</sup> It is due to my training in social scientific methodologies, and my academic mentorship by anthropologists, that I remain more aligned with the discipline of cultural anthropology than with theology.

But, still, I also found myself intrigued by, and drawn to, theology—this was especially true when I transitioned from a Religious Studies faculty in Canada to the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Divinity where theology—especially Christian theology—has historically been the normative discipline. Despite consistently correcting the colleagues who lumped me with the “other” theologians in my midst, I frequently found myself wanting, in fact, to write about theological questions and ideas. And the more I reflected on works which I found to be interesting and inspiring in the manner of engaging with questions of God, community, meaning, truth, love, etc., the more I was struck by the reality that the vast majority of these authors were theologians and philosophers—that is, they were not anthropologists. Perhaps, I realised one afternoon with genuine shock (and some disciplinary concern!) that I might be a sort of theologian after all.

In essence, my dilemma in articulating, and inhabiting, my intended methodological and theoretical framework was this: if I wished to do “pure” cultural anthropology, why was I yet so preoccupied (“haunted” might be a more truthful confession) by theological and philosophical questions rather than remaining focused more exclusively on the standard topics that so many other anthropologists would expect me to explore, given the location of my fieldsite—“orthodox” anthropological topics like caste, kinship, post-colonial theory, marriage, clothing, gender, power dynamics, appropriation, and the like? On the other hand, if my main end goal was theological inquiry, and if I thus only wanted my fieldwork to serve as a discussion board for the broader theological questions which had already planted themselves in my mind, could I not eliminate the middleman of fieldwork entirely? After grappling with

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<sup>8</sup> Miner, “Body Ritual among the Nacirema.”

this dilemma for months, the conviction grew in me that ethnographic fieldwork for me was not strictly about acquiring knowledge and understanding about why people are the way they are and why they believe what they believe, and subsequently noting the intricacies and interwovenness of their social, political, and family dynamics (and the like)—though it was all of that, too. Rather, from my interstitial locations, it was *also* about engaging deeply in conversations and being regularly confronted with real-life scenarios which could rigorously challenge some of my pre-existing assumptions about the very theological and philosophical themes that I sought to understand better.

Upon reading my thesis, cultural anthropologists may therefore note the various ways that my research project does *not* comply with some of the standards and expectations of the discipline. Theologians may be equally quick to point out that I am not firmly planted within any one theological tradition, and thus I do not seem to be a strong or suitable candidate to occupy a doctrinal space clearly designated for confessional theologians. I would agree with both these objections. However, I contend that I am particularly well-placed to occupy the interstitial spaces between anthropology and theology and, as Chapter 1 shall argue more extensively, I believe that anthropologists can learn from theologians—especially from the discipline of (Protestant) Christian theology and its preoccupation with religious belief. I am deeply intrigued and inspired by some of the pioneering conversations of scholars like Joel Robbins, Fenella Cannell, Natalie Wigg Stevenson, and others who are beginning to contemplate and explore the reciprocal benefits that can come into fruition if the disciplines of anthropology and theology consciously co-inhabit their overlapping spheres and learn from one another.<sup>9</sup> This thesis is, however, not primarily a theoretical argument for this methodological and disciplinary interstitiality—though I do engage with such arguments in Chapter 1—but it is an extended example of how such interstitial locations can generate scholarship by interweaving ethnographic observation with theological reflection.

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<sup>9</sup> Robbins, “Anthropology and Theology”; Robbins, “The Anthropology of Christianity: Unity, Diversity, New Directions. An Introduction to Supplement 10.”; Robbins, “Engaged Disbelief: Problematics of Detachment in Christianity and in the Anthropology of Christianity”; Robbins, “Anthropology and Theology: On Transformative Dialogue and Its Limits”; Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*; Cannell, *The Anthropology of Christianity*.

## 0.4. THREE DIALOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

Before one can begin to *invite*, one must first *encounter* the other. Several dialogical encounters have occurred leading up to the creation of this thesis. Three encounters are especially worth noting.

### 0.4.1. *The fieldwork encounter: Methodological tools used during fieldwork*

Firstly, as the researcher, I encountered first-hand the ethnographic material which has informed my thoughts for this thesis whilst conducting my fieldwork. While I was living in India between August 2016-May 2017, I spent several months at STA; during the months of this period that I was not at STA, I lived in Delhi, Mumbai, and surrounding areas (including a short trip to the villages near Faridpur with one of STA's former Managers) which facilitated my ongoing interactions with a number of key informants who are themselves long-time ashramites of STA, but who spend the greater part of the year living in their respective cities. I also returned to STA in April 2018 for five weeks, most of which was spent attending WA retreats and conversing with WA participants after the retreats were finished. During these cumulative eleven months of fieldwork, I conducted participant observation, with several unstructured and semi-structured interviews, as well as a few group interviews. I audio recorded these conversations whenever possible, and I transcribed each of the recordings word-for-word before employing a thematic analysis of the material; my thematic coding of this ethnographic data provided the lenses of focus that appear in subsequent chapters. I also used questionnaires and surveys with several past and present leaders (Acharyas) of the ashram, as well as with the students who participated in the SoE programme in September 2016. The survey I conducted amongst SoE participants gathered 16 responses (55% of the group) and I audio recorded, transcribed, and performed a line-by-line discourse analysis on 22 personal testimonies and 20 semi-structured interviews. A number of other semi-structured interviews took place which I did not audio record, and for these I instead relied on my memory (I almost always slipped away to write down notes immediately following such a conversation). Sometimes, I jotted down notes during the conversations themselves and later expanded on them in further detail when I typed up my fieldnotes at night. I also recorded, transcribed, and translated several of the *bhajans* and other devotional songs sung at the STA—some of which we shall discuss in Chapter 4. In addition to these more-sophisticated modes of data collection, I also meditated, ate, worked, swam, walked, ran away from poisonous snakes, and sang

together with my informants. This “deep hanging out”<sup>10</sup> allowed for a great number of informal conversations which also gave me insights and provided me with basic information about individuals’ backgrounds and motives for coming to STA.

As Chapter 1 will highlight in more detail, I was intentionally open with my informants about my own religious beliefs and doubts; this existential transparency, I contend, vitally affected the qualitative data I was able to access. Most people at STA knew, for example, that I had grown up in a Protestant Christian family in Canada and was thus relatively familiar with Christian scriptures and (Protestant) doctrinal teachings. They also knew that I had personal leanings towards certain Buddhist and Hindu philosophies, and thus I had hesitated when asked if I was, currently, a *Christian*; my informants also knew there were certain spiritual practices (including, for example, the invitation to deliver a sermon at one of STA’s Sunday services) that my conscience would not allow me to participate in. I entered into friendly terms with most of the people I met at STA, and, indeed, some became my good friends—we exchanged stories about our respective families; we spoke of our beliefs, fears, dreams; I was unhesitatingly and unconditionally cared for when I fell ill; we made plans to stay in touch after my fieldwork ended, and so forth. Despite our friendships, I often held on to rather different philosophical and doctrinal convictions than my informants, and on more than one occasion our discussions quickly revealed our difference of opinions—sometimes, these differences were illuminating pathways for me to gain deeper understandings of my informants’ beliefs and practices; while at other times, the differences—I can only assume—prohibited me from truly understanding their viewpoints. All of these intricacies surrounding the nature of fieldwork and access to qualitative data will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 1.

#### 0.4.2. *The writing up encounter: Selecting ethnographic data*

The second encounter is one I experienced when beginning to sift through my ethnographic data and to give structural shape to the thesis that you now hold in your hands. Anyone who has embarked on ethnographic fieldwork is aware of the sheer over-abundance of data with which one returns from the field. It is impossible to write about all the phenomena that I observed, or all the topics that came up in an interview setting. Ethnographers have to trust that, as we selectively sift through our data by using the various systematic tools of our craft, we are doing our utmost to *represent* our fieldsites in ways that do not obscure or twist

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<sup>10</sup> Geertz, “Deep Hanging Out.”

the experiences of our informants. In effect, we generally hope that our sketches are sound, faithful, and coherent, and are not overly-shaped by our unique preconceptions—I have done my best in this regard. Still, as I shall return to in Chapter 1 in greater detail, there is no “view from nowhere”<sup>11</sup> and I have undoubtedly picked up on certain ethnographic moments from my now-here which were of particular interest to me on account of my own spiritual and social pre-occupations, and these prejudgements have guided and lured me to explore certain questions over others. While remaining critically aware of my own existential leanings, I have done my best to represent STA, and its past and present realities in ways that, I think, accurately illustrate its dynamic past and present lifeworlds.

#### 0.4.3. *The writer-reader encounter*

A third dialogical encounter for any writer occurs once the written product is finished and shelved within a library for potential readers. This is the hermeneutic encounter of a “fusion of horizons” between the written work and the reader’s own interpretive frameworks.<sup>12</sup> Some qualitative researchers succeed in writing thoughtful, gripping ethnographies which draw the reader into the multifaceted universes that their ethnographic writing creatively opens up, but even the most compelling written work can only stay alive through a reader’s projective readings and simultaneous (re-)interpretations. By continuing to read—and gradually inhabiting—this text, you, the reader, are entering into a third type of dialogical exchange with me, the writer: one between *my* words and *your* thoughts.<sup>13</sup> (I wonder what thoughts you are constructing even now as you read these words—*Am I being too informal in my writing? Too personal? Too naïve? Have I disrespected the seemingly sacred genre of the PhD thesis? Is eschewing the scholarly norm permissible? Desirable?*) I am under no delusions about the limited outreach of the proverbial ivory tower: my final contribution of this particular research—this text, formed dialogically— will not live on unless it is engaged with by readers like yourself. (I wonder, again, in which ways you will engage with it—*Will it spark a discussion at a dinner table? Might my descriptions of different ways of being, thinking, and doing pique your curiosity? Will you seek out a place where you can learn more about the spiritual beliefs and practices you have glimpsed through this text? Will my words prompt you*

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<sup>11</sup> Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxiii.

<sup>13</sup> Nassim Soleimanpour’s unique play *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* has inspired some of the reflections contained in this paragraph. I first saw the thought-provoking production in Delhi, while conducting my fieldwork, and, captivated by its content, I later directed and produced three productions in Canada and the UK.

*to see anything or anyone in a new light? Does anything within us actually change on account of reading others' works?)* It may sound presumptuous to hope for such an existential impact with mere words, but it is the hope that you *will* engage in some way that has inspired me to write. And, having placed all these contexts, caveats, and clauses before you, I invite you to read on.

# Chapter 1:

## AN INTRODUCTION TO BELIEF-INCLUSIVE RESEARCH

“I have always felt that the action most worth watching is not at the center of things but where edges meet. I like shorelines, weather fronts, international borders. There are interesting frictions and incongruities in these places, and often, if you stand at the point of tangency, you can see both sides better than if you were in the middle of either one.”

- Anne Fadiman

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION

There was a knock on my door and, surprised, I answered it and found Suhasini standing on my balcony. “Why aren’t you at the class?” I asked her in Hindi. She simply shrugged, unapologetic for her truancy. “*You* aren’t there either. I find it so boring...don’t tell the Acharya, but I am so bored by it. I don’t understand it. Why must they teach us so many boring things?” Suhasini paused before continuing, staring at me: “I want *you* to teach me instead. You can teach me, can’t you? I am not going to keep going to that class when you can just teach me what you know.”

“But Suhasini,” I objected, “you are here to take the classes of the ashram, aren’t you? And there are teachers here to teach you! What do you want me to teach you? I am not a pastor, Suhasini. In fact, I am a student! I am also here to learn!”

“But you must know so much about Jesus. Have you read very much of the Bible?”

“Yes, I have read the Bible,” I answered, suddenly becoming aware that Suhasini was not the first at STA to have asked me this question.

“The whole thing?” she asked as she held up her Bible and flipped through its pages.

“Yes, Suhasini, I have read the whole thing.”

“How many times? Once or more than once?”

“I have read the whole thing at least once and then I have read several parts of it many, many times.”

“...The whole thing! The whole thing!” Suhasini repeated my words, as if emphatically

pronouncing the words would help her to process my feat. "...So...so, Nadya, you must know the Bible very well."

"Yes, I think I do."

"Then you can teach it to me!!" she exclaimed, seeming both ecstatic and relieved by her new-found solution for continuing to skip the "boring" classes while still learning the information she had come to STA to learn.

I tried to explain to Suhasini that I did not believe exactly the same things that the pastors at her home in Varanasi, or even the teachers at this ashram, believed. But that, if she really wanted, I could tell her some of the stories about Jesus in the Bible. And, of course, I told her, we could talk about any questions she might have—but maybe she would prefer to ask her questions to the Acharya. This, Suhasini agreed, seemed like a good arrangement—but she was not about to let me get off that easy with my casual profession of disbelief.

"But Nadya, now I know that you've read so much of the Bible, so now I know you must know so much about Jesus. So, tell me, why don't you sing any Jesus songs when you sing? All your songs are devotional songs (*bhakti bhajans*), yes, but they're not Jesus songs! If you've read the Bible you must know Jesus. And if you know Jesus you must want to sing Jesus-songs!!" Suhasini expressed, flabbergasted.

"Well, I used to sing Jesus songs, Suhasini. And I still know very many—I can even teach them to you if you'd like. We can translate them into Hindi during one of our English lessons! But I don't sing Jesus songs anymore, because now I'm confused about what I believe."

"Well, if you have confusion, you should speak with Acharya Ghosh. Ask him your questions! And pray to God the Father (*Pita Parmeshwar*), He will answer you...the Bible says!"

\* \* \*

This chapter goes beyond the brief methodological details mentioned in the Introduction: it is an outline of how I approached my ethnographic fieldwork at STA and why I chose to approach it in that way; I also explore some of the repercussions of this methodological posture insofar as my project is situated alongside other ethnographic research projects within the anthropology of religion. I introduce the concept "belief-inclusive research" (henceforth "BIR") to refer to the ways that I intentionally and regularly included my own (religious) beliefs, and also doubts, into the conversations that I had with my informants; and I



offer BIR as a distinctive theoretical and methodological posture for ethnographers who work in and with religious contexts.<sup>1</sup> I chose to utilise BIR, as the second half of this chapter will discuss in greater detail, for three reasons. Firstly, I desired to be as existentially transparent as possible in my interactions at my fieldsite—that is, I wanted to relate to my informants both as friends and as spiritual co-seekers at STA, while being aware, of course, that my role as a researcher crucially affected some of our interpersonal and social dynamics. Secondly, closely linked to the first reason, I felt that the particular environment of STA as a place that is, in its own words, open to people of “the *Christian* faith, a *different* faith, or even *no* faith [emphasis added]”<sup>2</sup> made it an appropriate site to explore and articulate the spectrum of my own beliefs and doubts. I might otherwise, as I have indeed done in other ethnographic settings, have exercised greater restraint about voicing my inner doubts. Thirdly, and perhaps most relevant to our present discussion, I had an initial sense that my intentional openness about my own beliefs and doubts would give me a certain degree of access to some types of qualitative data that I otherwise might not have been able to access.

\* \* \*

I have started this chapter with ethnographic thick description to introduce and illustrate my chosen topic partly in an effort to appease some of my colleagues within circles of anthropology who, when reading an earlier draft of my argument, promptly reported that it did not contain nearly enough gripping ethnographic detail to be of significant interest to anthropologists. This chapter addresses ethnographic methodologies and, in questioning some standardised methodological procedures and proposing that researchers should be actively encouraged to include their own religious beliefs/doubts in the midst of their ethnographic research, I do speak primarily to anthropologists in so far as I offer critiques of some of the discipline’s normative practices. However, as my introductory chapter has outlined, a significant aim of my project is to be able to, at very least, enter into conversation with both anthropologists and to theologians as I tread cautiously between, and also drink from the wells of, these two distinct disciplines. And, in order to achieve an interdisciplinary conversation, I believe that some level of familiarity must be felt by individuals within both disciplines. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Out of the four methodological postures indicated in a recent introductory textbook to the anthropology of religion, BIR most closely-resembles the fourth posture, called “Methodological Theism.” However, BIR remains distinct from Methodological Theism due to the ways that an active embracing of informants’ truth-claims is not a requirement of BIR. See Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics*, 33–44.

<sup>2</sup> This is one of the visions for STA as articulated by Stanley Jones in 1930. I elaborate upon this in Chapter 3.

I would like to have a second chance at introducing the contents of this chapter—and now in a way that is likely to be more familiar to theologians and philosophers who may be unaccustomed to the style of ethnographic description I used above.

A fundamental methodological backbone of the social scientific study of religion is the “bracketing out” of questions of metaphysical truth while conducting empirical research. Though this concept was not articulated in the social sciences until the 1960s, we can see earlier intimations of it in some philosophical circles. In his landmark work, *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger rejected the pursuit of metaphysics, understood as the quest for essential structures, in favour of focusing on self-understanding of human existence within temporal horizons.<sup>3</sup> And, in 1931, Heidegger’s teacher Edmund Husserl articulated the key concept of methodological bracketing (*epoché*), and thereafter he and other phenomenologists utilised it as a starting point of phenomenological research.<sup>4</sup> Methodological bracketing has become, as I indicated above, a standard element of the social sciences—especially in the contexts of qualitative research. This style of bracketing is often understood as laying down certain clear disciplinary boundaries between social scientists and theologians. Thus, Peter Berger argued that the social scientist’s conscious refusal to pursue truth in a way that a theologian would do is an “intrinsic limitation” of the social sciences.<sup>5</sup> In effect, while such methodological bracketing was noted to be a limitation insofar as it did not seek metaphysical truth, it was deemed necessary in order to conduct epistemically significant qualitative research within the social sciences. Following Berger’s “intrinsic limitation,” two further limitations of the bracketing approach have been pointed out, which I explore in Section 1.3.

However, as I take up in Section 1.4, there is an additional possible limitation which can be linked, albeit indirectly, to methodological bracketing and which is usually left unaddressed in the literature on ethnographic methods. Based on my own formal and informal anthropological mentorship that I have received from more-senior anthropologists, I have often felt dutifully bound to approach my fieldwork with a significant degree of detachment regarding my own (religious) beliefs and doubts. At one point leading up to my PhD fieldwork, I was explicitly advised by an anthropologist to not speak “about *that* [my own religious-oriented viewpoints]; keep the conversations focused on *them*” —suggesting, in no trivial way,

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<sup>3</sup> Hemming, *Heidegger’s Atheism*.

<sup>4</sup> Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*.

<sup>5</sup> Peter L. Berger, ‘Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion,’ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13, no. 2 (1974): 125, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1384374>.

that, as an anthropologist engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, my own beliefs and doubts surrounding metaphysical truth-claims should be bracketed out not just from my analysis and writing up but also from my conversations during fieldwork. Some of my peers in anthropology—who, like me, received their training in anthropology between 2008-2018—have similarly expressed the viewpoint that anthropologists should refrain from speaking of their own religious beliefs and doubts during their fieldwork, sometimes alluding to the well-established taboo in the discipline of an anthropologist “going native.”<sup>6</sup> Still other colleagues might not feel beholden to any disciplinary prescriptive to refrain from such conversations, but, for one reason or another, they too do not delve into such metaphysical topics during the course of their fieldwork. I speculate that this notable absence of a researcher’s willingness to speak freely of their own religious beliefs and doubts can be linked to anthropology’s disciplinary practice of methodological bracketing which, as I shall elaborate upon, stipulates that anthropologists should not weigh in on questions concerning that which is (or is not) metaphysically true.

This disciplinary demand to refrain from offering judgments or expressing personal opinions on the topic of Truth has, as I shall reiterate below, seemed to have trickled down from the analysis and writing up phases of ethnographic research to the processes of ethnographic fieldwork itself. We can see, rather clearly, the advice to refrain from actively engaging in questions and quests related to metaphysical truth-claims articulated by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the 1960s: Geertz advised anthropologists to adopt a stance of strict neutrality during their fieldwork, suggesting that they “put aside at once the tone of the village atheist and that of the village preacher, as well as their more sophisticated equivalents.”<sup>7</sup> And, more recently, anthropology’s disciplinary unease with researchers sharing their own views of metaphysical reality in their conversations during their fieldwork has been highlighted by scholars like Robert Orsi.<sup>8</sup> And, importantly, I contend that this disciplinary unease and subsequent absence of researchers speaking of their own beliefs and doubts in the field is not left unnoticed by their informants: Ruy Blanes has noted that one of his informants vocalised the assumption that all anthropologists are atheists.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, whether we are atheists, agnostics, or believers, we have “put aside” our own beliefs. Yet, in direct opposition to

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<sup>6</sup> Ewing, “Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe.”

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek, 2nd ed. (MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 74.

<sup>8</sup> Orsi, *History and Presence*; Orsi, “Belief.”

<sup>9</sup> Blanes, “The Atheist Anthropologist,” 224.

Geertz's advice to researchers to "put aside" their own beliefs—whether those beliefs are of an atheistic or theistic ilk—I have found that my intentional decision to candidly voice my beliefs and doubts in various conversations with my informants—that is, to conduct BIR—has played a vital role in my access to some types of qualitative data. Thus, I contend, BIR has the potential to crucially widen an ethnographer's access to qualitative data—perhaps, as I shall return to below, specifically in certain research contexts where belief is deemed by informants to be an especially indispensable aspect of life.

To be clear, I am not the first to advocate for the inclusion of a researcher's beliefs and doubts in the context of ethnographic fieldwork, nor am I the first to claim that this inclusion would be of benefit to the discipline of cultural anthropology; similar defences have been offered by Brian Howell<sup>10</sup>, Eloise Meneses *et al.*<sup>11</sup>, and Naomi Haynes<sup>12</sup>, to give some recent examples. Where my argument differs from these earlier defences is in my justification: while others have focused on important elements such as the potential for a deepened interpretation through drawing upon one's own religious experiences, I instead focus on the researcher's ability to access qualitative data. Specifically, I consider a number of examples from ethnographic literature which cumulatively suggest that a researcher's own beliefs cannot be so hermetically quarantined without affecting a researcher's basic access to qualitative data.

The crux of my argument, to be developed further in Section 1.4 and Section 1.5, is this: while some ethnographers, either consciously or subconsciously, consistently refrain from speaking openly with their informants about the (religious) beliefs and doubts that they themselves hold on to in an effort to supposedly *increase* their access to qualitative data—e.g. "keep the conversations focused on *them*"—this selective withholding of information about the researcher's own religious beliefs can ironically act as an epistemic obstacle to certain types of data-access. I have compiled several instances which demonstrate that the informants' assessments of a researcher's beliefs and worldviews can inform and shape the data that is shared in an interview setting, as well as critically influence whether the researcher is invited by their informants to observe certain social phenomena. Since interviews and participant observation are two crucial pillars of qualitative research, a researcher's access to these modes of data collection are of the utmost importance, and any limitations are worth noting and addressing.

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<sup>10</sup> Howell, "The Repugnant Cultural Other Speaks Back: Christian Identity as Ethnographic 'Standpoint.'"

<sup>11</sup> Meneses et al., "Engaging the Religious Committed Other: Anthropologists and Theologians in Dialogue."

<sup>12</sup> Meneses et al., 93–94.

On account of this epistemic obstacle, I argue that there are certain circumstances in which some degree of shared belief should be professed (or, rather, a degree which the informants believe exists—a subtle yet important nuance that I shall return to momentarily) between the researcher and informants in order to gain a certain type of data-access in interviews and participant observation. This space of *shared belief* between researcher and informant can take the form either of mutually-held doctrinal convictions in which researchers and informants possess resonating understandings of what is metaphysically true, or it can sometimes take the form of an existential openness to the category of belief itself. That is to say, the very willingness of a researcher to voice their own beliefs and doubts, and thus participate in a shared quest for metaphysical truth, can convey the sense that such quests are not simply topics of social scientific inquiry but are themselves of vital existential importance and, consequently, a *shared belief* between informant and researcher can be forged—I return to these possible expressions of shared belief in Section 1.6. Yet, BIR itself is not as problem-free as one might hope—thus, in Section 1.6 I shall also expand upon the messiness of BIR which necessitates the forthcoming caveats: I argue that, *sometimes*, *some* anthropologists should intentionally bring *some* of their own beliefs into the forefront of their ethnographic research, thereby *sometimes* increasing their access to qualitative data with *some of* their informants.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify a few points. First, I must clarify a phrase that I have mentioned twice already in the above paragraphs. When I invoke the concept of the “researcher’s belief,” it is not a neatly-conceptualised belief system of the individual researcher alone that I am referring to— for to assume that the “researcher’s belief” can somehow be tidily extracted from the wonderful yet messy webs of ethnographic research would fly in the face of some important realities of participant observation in the anthropological discipline. Instead, I am using the phrase as a short-hand expression to refer to the multiple ways that the informants can envisage and situate the researcher and assess the beliefs of the researcher. That is, we are not dealing with the researcher’s beliefs in only the ways in which the researcher understands their own beliefs; I am instead referring to the somewhat unpredictable manner that informants can interpret and make sense of the researcher’s beliefs. In this dialectical understanding, the researcher’s own ideas about themselves—which spiritual beliefs they hold onto, why they are conducting this research project, etc.—might not align neatly with their informants’ understandings of the same. In this process, an ethnographer might be ascribed by an informant a greater degree of belief regarding a certain matter than what they consider themselves to hold.

An example from an Indian context of fieldwork comes readily to mind: during Anne Vallely's introductory meeting with members of a Jain ascetic community with whom she was starting 13 months of ethnographic research in Rajasthan (India), she was told that her interest in Jainism was best explained by her having been a Jain nun (*sadhvi*) in an earlier life; whereas Vallely's self-professed belief concerning her interest in Jainism was less wrapped up in cosmological ideas of reincarnation—she writes that her interest stems from a film shown to her in her childhood.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, an ethnographer's informants might refuse to acknowledge as credible a particular belief that the ethnographer does claim they hold—for example, Joseph Webster writes about the ways that his Christian informants in Gamrie (Scotland) refused to accept that he was *truly* a Christian, and they consequently requested that he not participate in the sacrament of bread and wine.<sup>14</sup> The community's refusal to accept Webster as a Christian persisted despite Webster having professed his own Christian faith both verbally and in written form.<sup>15</sup> In both of these ways—in what we might think of, respectively, as over-ascribing and withholding belief—the informants' assessments of the researcher's belief can challenge the researcher's self-understanding. Thus, the category of “the researcher's belief” is not singular but multiple; there are numerous ways that a researcher's beliefs can be conceptualised, interrogated, ascribed, or denied by their informants, and “the researcher's belief” is thus multiply resituated during social interactions on the fieldsite. Consequently, the researcher's open and honest effort to include her own belief into her research (i.e. to conduct BIR) is merely one contributing factor with regard to the ways that informants understand the researcher's beliefs—and, yet, it is only this aspect that she can directly control. Thus, we must consider in tandem these two types of articulating belief, namely, both the researcher's own professed beliefs and the ascriptions of belief by their informants.

While we are on the topic of belief, it is also necessary to note that this very concept of “belief,” around which this entire chapter revolves, merits some unpacking. After all, “belief”—at least certain notions of it—is the dominant feature of religion primarily for Protestant Christians, and it might not be as compelling or interesting to consider this concept in some other religious contexts. There can be tendencies for scholars within religious studies—especially those of us, like myself, from Western Christian backgrounds—to

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<sup>13</sup> Vallely, *Guardians of the Transcendent*.

<sup>14</sup> Webster, *The Anthropology of Protestantism*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Webster, 15.

somewhat uncritically apply Christian notions regarding belief to other religious traditions.<sup>16</sup> Jean Pouillon insightfully notes that the very notion of “religious belief” is far more applicable amongst Christians than, say, amongst the Dangaleat in Chad who, Pouillon argues, do not share Christianity’s emphasis on revelation and who thus cannot be thought to understand or value “belief” in the same way that many Christians do.<sup>17</sup> Along similar lines, Susan J. Ritchie highlights that the practice of interpreting religious belief as if it can be isolated to the cognitive stance of a single individual is historically linked to Protestant origins.<sup>18</sup> Further demonstrating the point that “belief” might be a category that is particularly applicable to and relevant within Protestant Christian communities, Leo Coleman discusses the differences between his interactions with a certain Sufi mystic and some American Evangelical Christians whom he met during the course of his fieldwork. While his Sufi informants wanted him “merely to conform” to their prescribed behavioural patterns and actions rather than to *believe*, the American missionaries wanted him to believe.<sup>19</sup>

Such examples from the field suggest that it is worth keeping in mind the distinctively Protestant contexts of these scenarios in which “belief” is deemed especially important.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, my own explorations into the question of a researcher’s own belief first arose when I was conducting fieldwork amongst Protestant Charismatic Christians in Canada (2013-2015), and then developed further while I was conducting fieldwork at STA (2016-2018), which, crucially, has its roots in Protestant (Methodist) denominations. Furthermore, my own childhood and teenage years, which were deeply imbedded in Protestant communities, have no doubt made me particularly attuned to matters of belief in religious settings. Keeping these Protestant contexts in mind, ethnographers in their various fieldsites and areas of study will therefore have to consider how relevant or useful this foregrounding about a “researcher’s belief” is for them in their own research contexts. It might very well be the case that, even in certain Protestant contexts, the notion of “belief” is not all that important.<sup>21</sup> However, I do know

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<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Ruel, “Christians as Believers,” in *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, ed. J. Davis, vol. A.S.A. monograph (London: Academic Press, 1982), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/80689743/Malcolm-Ruel-Christians-as-Believers>.

<sup>17</sup> Pouillon, “Remarks on the Verb ‘to Believe,’” 491–92.

<sup>18</sup> Ritchie, “Contesting Secularism: Reflexive Methodology, Belief Studies, and Disciplined Knowledge.”

<sup>19</sup> Leo Coleman, “The Obligation to Receive: The Countertransference, the Ethnographer, Protestants, and Proselytization in North India,” in *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*, ed. John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 118.

<sup>20</sup> Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*; Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*; Webster, *The Anthropology of Protestantism*.

<sup>21</sup> Howell, “The Repugnant Cultural Other Speaks Back: Christian Identity as Ethnographic ‘Standpoint,’” 377–80; Ruel, “Christians as Believers,” 98.

that for me, as a religious studies scholar whose research relies heavily upon ethnographic fieldwork, it has been crucially important to consider “belief” in the context of conducting research alongside Protestant Christians in both Canada and India.

Through this route we return to outlining some justifications for BIR. To repeat, while BIR is indeed my response to the disciplinary habit—resulting, in turn, from the practice of methodological bracketing that I will sketch in subsequent sections (1.2 and 1.3)—of researchers not speaking of their metaphysical beliefs during fieldwork, I by no means view BIR as an across-the-board replacement for research postures in which researchers do *not* speak of their own metaphysical beliefs<sup>22</sup>; I am not here advocating for a cognitively superior or ideal theoretical framework in which to conduct ethnographic research. It would be extremely problematic to stipulate, *sans réserve*, that a researcher must necessarily share in, and speak of, the specific beliefs held by their research community in order to gain access to important qualitative data, because, simply put, the ethnographic data suggests otherwise: there are, for instance, a number of cases in which an anthropologist’s status as an outsider and a non-believer positioned them as neutral receivers who, precisely because of their perceived neutrality or even their outside status, were able to gain access to important qualitative data.<sup>23</sup>

I interpret these multiple vantage points of data-access to resonate with a theme that Joel Robbins has recently highlighted in discussing Marilyn Strathern’s work: “efforts to increase attachments in one direction tend to involve detaching from them in others.”<sup>24</sup> Given that no human being—and, therefore, no anthropologist—occupies the Archimedean point of an impartial spectator (I return to this point), a greater degree of “attachment” to one perspective or person is usually concurrent with a greater degree of “detachment” from another perspective or person. One lesson I take from this multi-dimensionality of human interactive spaces is that each anthropologist’s unique status has the potential to give them access to distinct elements and different degrees of qualitative data; yet, in gaining access to some of these elements, we lose sight of others. Therefore, recognising the myriad of ways through which anthropologists can gain access to certain types of qualitative data, and also recognising the infinite range of qualitative data, this chapter contends that BIR should be viewed and embraced as one of many approaches to qualitative research. Rather than merely *reluctantly*

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<sup>22</sup> Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics*, 34–43.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, “Getting Close by Staying Distant: Fieldwork with Proselytizing Groups,” 248; Young and Goulet, *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters*; Borneman and Hammoudi, *Being There*; Van Maanen, “Fieldwork on the Beat.”

<sup>24</sup> Robbins, “Engaged Disbelief: Problematics of Detachment in Christianity and in the Anthropology of Christianity,” 115.



*permit* researchers to engage in discussions of their own (religious) beliefs and doubts, anthropology as a discipline should generate conceptual spaces for a posture of research which incorporates, and thus *actively invites*, the researcher to bring in elements of their own religious beliefs and doubts while conducting their fieldwork research.

## 1.2. METHODOLOGICAL BRACKETING: JUSTIFICATIONS AND “INTRINSIC” LIMITATION

Above, I indicated that BIR is related to methodological bracketing in an indirect, but important, manner: we can summarise the relationship through considering two linked premises. (1) Methodological bracketing demands that anthropologists, in their written works, do not assert truth-claims about metaphysical reality; it is not within the disciplinary bounds of anthropology to do so. (2) Some anthropologists refrain from exploring, or expressing, their own beliefs regarding metaphysical truth during the course of their fieldwork and instead strive to enact a stance of “neutrality” à la Geertz (see p.19). Thus, as I posited above, there seems to be a certain “spilling over” from (1) to (2) in the processes of writing up and conducting fieldwork: some anthropologists straightforwardly and consistently assume a research posture which simply does not engage with questions of metaphysical truth. BIR can be understood as a response to the second premise, which can be methodologically limited in *some* contexts, rather than the first, premise, which it does not deny. However, to better understand methodological bracketing itself, I shall first provide an introductory overview of the bracketing approach, its justifications, and some of its widely accepted limitations. I explore, first, the claim that the social scientific study of religion assumes, encourages, or demands of its researchers that their own religious beliefs and convictions (or lack thereof) remain methodologically sequestered from their quotidian research.

For a clear presentation of the theme of methodological bracketing, we may begin with G. van der Leeuw who, in the late 1920s, understood the use of the bracketing approach as a strategy to ensure that “no judgment is expressed concerning the objective world, which is thus placed ‘between brackets,’ as it were” and argued that this restriction resulted in “abstention from all judgment regarding these controversial topics.”<sup>25</sup> A similar concept was, as mentioned above, also articulated by Heidegger and Husserl sometime around 1930.<sup>26</sup> We find a development of this methodological bracketing in Berger’s classic sociological text, *The*

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<sup>25</sup> Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 646.

<sup>26</sup> Smith and The Society of Christian Philosophers, “The Art of Christian Atheism.”

*Sacred Canopy*, where he argues that “every inquiry into religious matters that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based on methodological atheism.”<sup>27</sup> Several years later, Berger restates his conviction that “the *scientific* [sic] study of religion must bracket the ultimate truth-claims implied by its subject.”<sup>28</sup> Berger’s primary justification for adopting a stance of “methodological atheism” is that the social scientist, *qua* scientist, must consider only that which is empirically available—this stipulation automatically excludes weighing in on the reality of God or gods, and on any number of other phenomena often described by religious believers. After arguing that scientific methods require empirically verifiable data points, he states: “whatever else they may be or not be, the gods are not empirically available, and neither their nature nor their existence can be verified through the very limited procedures given to the scientist.”<sup>29</sup> Berger then concludes that “anyone engaged in the scientific study of religion will have to resign himself to this intrinsic limitation—regardless of whether, in his extrascientific existence, he is a believer, an atheist, or a skeptic.”<sup>30</sup> Importantly, it is not that Berger himself wishes to invalidate or debunk religious claims; he only argues that questions of truth (i.e. rather than “truths” in the sense of meaningful experiences claimed by informants) are not ones which fall within the disciplinary realm of social scientific study.

A similar argument is made by Arvind Sharma (2001), who suggests that a reason for such methodological bracketing may also be found in the fact that the discipline of Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*) was conceived of, and subsequently birthed, in the second half of the nineteenth century, when rationalist models of understanding the world were often championed as the ultimate standards of rigorous scholarship.<sup>31</sup> As such, Religious Studies, under whose general rubric the social scientific study of religion falls, has been integrally shaped by scholars who favour and focus on aspects of religious living which are empirically accessible and which can be understood rationally. This cognitive privileging of a rational mode of understanding was clearly articulated in 1959 when E.E. Evans-Pritchard noted a correlation between being a successful scholar and refusing to entertain or embrace questions of faith.<sup>32</sup> He wrote, “all the leading sociologists and anthropologists contemporaneous with,

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<sup>27</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Berger, “Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion,” 125.

<sup>29</sup> Berger, 125.

<sup>30</sup> Berger, 126.

<sup>31</sup> Sharma, *To the Things Themselves, Essays on the Discourse and Practice of the Phenomenology of Religion*, 230.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy Larsen points out that Evans-Pritchard was hardly agnostic in his own writings, despite supposedly thinking he remained totally different from theologians. Larsen explores and notes how Evans-Pritchard’s own writings can be read as a justification for religion. See Larsen, *The Slain God*.

or since, Frazer were agnostics and positivists. [...] Almost all the leading anthropologists of my own generation would, I believe, hold that religious faith is [a] total illusion, a curious phenomenon soon to become extinct.”<sup>33</sup> Given the institutional pervasiveness of these viewpoints, ethnographers who hold onto specific religious beliefs have often “been considered problematic, if not anathema, to the anthropological enterprise.”<sup>34</sup>

While, following Berger, methodological bracketing does not necessarily demand that the researcher dismiss religious faith as a “total illusion,”<sup>35</sup> it does require that the researcher is willing to bracket out or suspend such questions of substantive truth for the purpose of their research. That is to say, if and when an anthropologist comes across an informant who makes a metaphysical truth-claim about God, the anthropologist has been advised “to avoid arbitrating and evaluating and simply to begin describing, cataloguing, and comparing the various claims in favor or against the existence of such a deity. One who claims that a god either does or does not direct the world may be right; but then again, they may be wrong. In light of no publicly testable and debateable evidence one way or another, there is little to be gained from trying to prove or dismiss such claims.”<sup>36</sup> Ninian Smart, who played a significant role in founding the first Religious Studies department in the United Kingdom at Lancaster University, thus articulated in the early 1970s that any question about truth is “a question not asked, not a belief left undecided.”<sup>37</sup> Less than one decade later, a similar view was expressed in a rather different context. In writing the preface to an edited volume which seeks to include both theological and anthropological scholarship on the topic of sacrifice, Meyer Fortes suggested that agnosticism should be practised by anthropologists in order to have “a professionally correct approach to their task,” by which he meant, he clarified, the ability “to achieve objectivity.”<sup>38</sup>

Further, because the tools available within the social sciences do not enable a social scientist to engage with truth-claims theologically, social scientists must instead focus on the empirical aspects of the phenomenon that they are studying, thus rendering their exploration methodologically secular. C. Roderick Wilson summarises this approach of methodologically secular scholarship quite well when referring to anthropologists trained in Western institutional spaces, he says, “we carried around with us scientific explanations of natural phenomena that

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<sup>33</sup> Evans-Pritchard, “Religion and the Anthropologists,” 162.

<sup>34</sup> Howell, “The Repugnant Cultural Other Speaks Back: Christian Identity as Ethnographic ‘Standpoint,’” 372.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> McCutcheon, “General Introduction,” 8.

<sup>37</sup> Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Fortes, “Preface,” vi–vii.

allowed us to “normalize” observations, to bring observations that ran counter to the usual into conformity with the expected.”<sup>39</sup> This normalising approach remains a fairly standard practice in the social scientific study of religion: religious experiences cannot usually be brought into a scientific laboratory for controlled experimental study, and they do not always work in predictable patterns. Thus, they cannot be circumscribed within the canons of verifiability and falsification required by scientific empiricism. It is this conceptual and disciplinary incompatibility with empirical methods—involving predictability, quantification, and repeatability—that, on the basis of Berger’s argument for bracketing, mandates that social scientists should consciously refuse to explore questions concerning the metaphysical reality of their informants’ putative religious experiences.<sup>40</sup>

These methodological debates apply in particular to the discipline of anthropology which emerged in the 1920s from the desire to understand humans and cultures. In the self-understanding of most anthropologists, anthropology is distinct from theology in one particular regard: whereas confessional theologians make their inquiries “explicitly in relation to a specific religious confession, or a combination of sacred texts, traditions, and confessions,”<sup>41</sup> anthropology has never presented itself as a doorway to universal truth. Instead, anthropology has dedicated itself to understanding how and why things are the way they are in a particular time and place. It highlights the local, the incidental, the particular, the fragmentary, and the liminal; anthropology therefore has a methodological antipathy to configuring universalising claims in the style of grand theory or transcultural narrative. M.F.C. Bourdillon clearly delineates these distinctions between the two disciplines by claiming that “theology studies the traditions from within [...] anthropologists look at different cultures from the point of views of outsiders.”<sup>42</sup> Anthropology tries to combat social forms of ethnocentrism by highlighting cultural relativities across diverse local settings of different groups of outsiders, and these context-dependent variabilities render questions of absolute universal truth problematic, if not unanswerable. Thus, anthropologists are taught that they must “neither affirm nor deny the

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<sup>39</sup> Wilson, “Seeing They See Not,” 199.

<sup>40</sup> There has been a shift among anthropologists to refer to the individuals alongside whom they conduct ethnographic research as “interlocutors.” The reason for this shift, as I understand it, is to acknowledge the collaborative nature of ethnographic research and give credit to members of the community. However, I align myself with Marilyn Strathern (1999) and choose to use the term “informant.” My use of “informant” is certainly not meant to dismiss the contributions of individuals or to suggest that anthropological researchers hold an elevated status. Far from it, I retain the term “informant” to implicitly acknowledge that there remains a substantive degree of agency that lies with the informants. See Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect*.

<sup>41</sup> Wildman, “Theology Without Walls,” 242.

<sup>42</sup> Bourdillon, “Introduction,” 5.

existence of the gods”<sup>43</sup> lest they confuse their methodological and theoretical frameworks with those of the theologians. Anthropology’s scope has therefore been intrinsically, and intentionally, limited by its method.

While theological questions are sometimes (though certainly not always) interesting to the individual anthropologist *qua* individual, they are not—at least they have not been within the common disciplinary matrices—questions that an anthropologist raises *qua* anthropologist, let alone seeks to answer. While it is this conscious refusal to explore questions of metaphysical truth that, as we saw earlier, Berger referred to as an “intrinsic limitation” of the discipline, this restriction should not be read in a negative sense. Berger does not begrudge the social sciences for this methodological limitation, nor does he urge social scientists to find a way to overcome it. Rather, for Berger, this limitation is a *constitutive* aspect of the social sciences, since the moment a social scientist has moved beyond that which is empirical, she would no longer be exploring topics *qua* social scientist.<sup>44</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that social scientists—even, or rather *especially*—those within the anthropology of religion—a scholarly circle where, as Jon Bialecki comments tongue-in-cheek, the optimistic and the innocent “might expect [talk of God] the most”<sup>45</sup>—often do not speak of God, let alone make metaphysical truth-claims regarding God.

### 1.3. TWO ADDITIONAL LIMITATIONS TO METHODOLOGICAL BRACKETING

In the decades following Berger’s identification of this “intrinsic limitation,” at least two further limitations of methodological bracketing have been pointed out. While Berger felt no need to overcome the “intrinsic limitation,” many anthropologists have regarded these other two limitations as clear indications that a certain measure of theoretical reformation of the discipline of anthropology is needed. These two limitations that I have found to be articulated by several scholars who are broadly situated in the field of the social scientific study of religion are as follows: (1) total objectivity is conceptually impossible even with systematic attempts at bracketing, and (2) bracketing is, in any case, deeply hegemonic because it reinforces a power dynamic which privileges the researcher’s worldviews and interpretive frameworks over those of their research communities. Let us look at both of these in turn.

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<sup>43</sup> Smart, *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge*, 54.

<sup>44</sup> Evans-Pritchard makes a similar argument in his book on Nuer Religion (1956) in which he says that there is a point at which “the theologian takes over from the anthropologist.” Quoted in Larsen, *The Slain God*, 109.

<sup>45</sup> Bialecki, “Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism?,” 33.

### 1.3.1. *Self-Reflexivity Reveals the Conceptual Impossibility of Objectivity*

In response to the disciplinary push for self-reflexivity during the 1980s and the 1990s, anthropologists were forced to come to terms with the reality that, though they might diligently try to bracket out their own worldviews, convictions, or beliefs from their research, they inescapably continued to filter data through their distinctive interpretive lenses which bring along with them the possibilities of misinterpretation, misrepresentation, or simply missing the point. This dense entanglement between perceiver and perceived is encapsulated in the succinct saying attributed to the popular writer Anaïs Nin: “we don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.” That is to say: any notion of pure objectivity, even with an intentional bracketing-out of supposedly extraneous themes and ideas, is impossible because we can never fully step away from our preconceptions which deeply shape our interpretations. All experience is already experience-*as*. Prominent twentieth century philosophers such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Ricoeur were influential in developing the concept that individual subjectivity is an unavoidable element of academic scholarship—let alone of life!—and, in arguing thus, they rejected some dominant views of nineteenth century philosophy which had championed the universal pursuit of timeless truth.<sup>46</sup> Opposing certain metaphysical and theological aspirations to gain the view from nowhere<sup>47</sup>, they instead sought to explore the minutiae of the view from now-here.

Shortly after, this critique of objectivity was also applied to the hard sciences, where the influential chemist Michael Polanyi declared in the late 1950s: “science is regarded as objectively established in spite of its passionate origins. It should be clear by this time that I dissent from that belief...”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Polanyi argued in his trailblazing book that all forms of knowledge acquisition—even those that seem to follow impersonal mechanical rules—are shaped by the deeply “personal” subject who first hypothesises, then acts, and finally interprets in the process of knowledge acquisition. This rejection of a putative objectivity became foundational for other scholarly disciplines such as feminist studies, post-colonial studies, and literary criticism, and others that later shaped the reflexive turn in anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s. Through the critiques that were raised in such disciplinary contexts, scholars were forced to grapple with certain methodological elements that they had not previously

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<sup>46</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy: From Kant to Habermas*.

<sup>47</sup> Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*.

<sup>48</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 142.

considered.<sup>49</sup> Some of the key scholars who have responded to these critiques and initiated the reflexive turn within anthropology include James Clifford, George Marcus, Ruth Behar, Renato Rosaldo, and Vincent Crapanzano. I shall focus on the work of Crapanzano as a way of unpacking the main insights of this turn.

Contributing to the influential volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Crapanzano argues that ethnographers displayed a notable lack of self-awareness in much of the ethnographic writing that predates the reflexive turn.<sup>50</sup> To illustrate his argument, Crapanzano compares ethnographers to Hermes—the messenger god who cunningly convinces others that his partial message is in fact the entire truth—by stating that both are concerned with presenting indisputable truth while possessing only partial truth. Crapanzano goes on to note one crucial difference, however: the uncritical ethnographer is not aware that they take partial truths and present them in their ethnographies as something beyond dispute; it is only Hermes who is cognoscente of this limitation—the ethnographer mistakenly believes that they perform no tricks. To further illustrate what he asserts to be a lamentable lack of self-awareness on the part of the ethnographer, Crapanzano presents a close reading of three ethnographic texts (including Geertz’s classic description of the Balinese cockfight) to highlight some ways that ethnographers establish ethnographic authority in their written works, and ultimately present their narratives as indisputable truths. The crucial thesis that Crapanzano puts forward is three-fold: firstly, the ethnographer might not recognise that their interpretation of data has been selectively filtered through the lenses of their own preconceptions; secondly, their failure to recognise this selectivity contributes to, and even unwittingly encourages, a number of inevitable shortcomings with regard to their data; and, finally, their proclaimed objectivity establishes a posture of ethnographic authority.<sup>51</sup> Responding to these types of critiques, the reflexive turn argued that—despite all efforts at clinically bracketing out questions of (dis)belief—pure objectivity remains an impossible ideal. In other words, despite an anthropologist’s persistent efforts to bracket out their preconceptions and inevitable biases, they would yet have to sift through their data with their own interpretive lenses.

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<sup>49</sup> Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*; Geertz, *Works and Lives*; Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*; Crapanzano, *Tuhami*; Ruby, *A Crack in the Mirror*.

<sup>50</sup> Crapanzano, “Hermes’ Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description.”

<sup>51</sup> Crapanzano, 53.

### 1.3.2. *The Fundamental Bias of Methodological Bracketing*

A number of scholars have argued that methodological bracketing further contributes to a “fundamental bias” wherein it is the *researcher* who decides which elements can be bracketed.<sup>52</sup> In such instances, there is often a privileging of secular explanations over religious descriptions.<sup>53</sup> For example, a researcher might decide to look at kinship, sacrifice, values, or any number of other phenomena, in isolation from religious/spiritual belief. As researchers thus selectively decide what they choose to bracket out, they ignore the possibility that their informants might view those very elements as inseparably connected with one another. This authoritative selectivity generates a power dynamic which privileges the worldviews of the researcher over those of their informants, and ultimately places more power in the hands of the researcher. In highlighting the problem, Katherine P. Ewing writes that “to rule out the possibility of belief in another’s reality is to encapsulate that reality and, thus, to impose implicitly the hegemony of one’s own view of the world.”<sup>54</sup> In this vein, American folk scholar David L. Hufford refers to the bracketing out of truth-claims as a “serious, systematic bias that runs through most academic studies of spiritual belief.”<sup>55</sup> Since all ethnographic data is always filtered through specific conceptual lenses, any argument which claims that the bracketing associated with methodological atheism is “value neutral” is incoherent, because such a methodological stance automatically excludes the supernatural from sociological and anthropological discourse.<sup>56</sup> An even more forceful objection to methodological bracketing is expressed by Douglas Ezzy, who calls its privileging of secular worldviews “a form of cultural imperialism” which systematically misinterprets religious phenomena.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Michael Cantrell argues that Berger’s depiction of spiritual and religious “Other worlds” as being beyond empirical observation (and thus not within the realm of the social sciences) is “phenomenologically inaccurate” for a large number of believers.<sup>58</sup> For such believers, their worlds cannot be reductively viewed through the prisms of the world of the unbeliever—even if belief is suspended purely for methodological purposes—and therefore

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<sup>52</sup> Northcote, “Objectivity and the Supernormal”; Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience.”

<sup>53</sup> Larsen, *The Slain God*, 8; Merz et al., “Occupying the Ontological Penumbra,” 80; Howell, “The Repugnant Cultural Other Speaks Back: Christian Identity as Ethnographic ‘Standpoint,’” 371–72.

<sup>54</sup> Ewing, “Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe,” 572.

<sup>55</sup> Hufford, “The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies,” 61.

<sup>56</sup> Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience,” 67.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?”

<sup>58</sup> Cantrell, 377.



any attempt to bracket out the sacred from the “rest” of the world fails to genuinely understand the world of the believers themselves.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, Cantrell concludes that, far from being a neutral exercise in objectivity, methodological atheism “systematically negates the explanatory, moral, and existential significance of one’s relationship with the sacred other. Methodological bracketing forecloses any possibility that what is given in religious experience could provide an insight into the truth regarding the genesis of that experience.”<sup>60</sup> Conversely, he argues, the basic idea of scholarly neutrality can sometimes be a cover for passionate disbelief.<sup>61</sup> We see a similar argument put forth more recently by Yasmin Moll who works in the field of the anthropology of Islam. She claims, “unlike theologians, we as anthropologists routinely proceed as if God did not matter analytically...in common with other disciplines in the global Western academy we seldom explicitly make religious warrants the basis of either our pedagogy or our theorizing.” Thus, clearly highlighting the ways that this bracketing stance within anthropology acts as a fundamental bias that favours the researcher’s views, she concludes, “even when we [researchers] question [anthropology’s] secular suppositions, we only do so from the secular presupposition of divinity as unnecessary to the labor of analysis.”<sup>62</sup>

#### 1.4. LIMITING ACCESS TO QUALITATIVE DATA

Having discussed in Section 1.2 and Section 1.3 the bracketing approach, its theoretical justifications, its limitation originally proposed by Berger, and two additional limitations, I now return to a more detailed discussion of another limitation which, as I have indicated in Section 1.1, remains underexplored in anthropological literature: I argue that methodological bracketing can limit one’s access to certain types of qualitative data. This section differs from Section 1.2 and Section 1.3 due to the ways it focuses primarily on the fieldwork phase (rather than the fieldwork and the writing up phases) of ethnographic research. Further, while the former limitations of methodological bracketing reside within the individual *researcher*, the limitation that I explore in Section 1.4 instead arises as a result of the social agency that

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<sup>59</sup> See Grossman, “On Peter Berger’s Definition of Religion”; Evans, *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*.

<sup>60</sup> Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?,” 385–86.

<sup>61</sup> See also Karla O. Poewe, “The Nature, Globality, and History of Charismatic Christianity,” in *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, ed. Karla O. Poewe (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 1–29; and Peter Donovan, “Neutrality in Religious Studies,” *Religious Studies* 26, no. 1 (1990): 103–16, who argues that bracketing is a means of getting at other matters that are of interest to the researcher.

<sup>62</sup> Moll, “Television Is Not Radio: Theologies of Mediation in the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” 257.

informants hold and exercise with regard to how much—or how frequently—they allow a researcher to access certain types of qualitative data.

My critical argument, as I first indicated in the opening pages of this chapter, is this: while the metaphysical beliefs of the researcher are often left out of the dialogical exchanges that occur during fieldwork, the foregrounding of the researcher's beliefs in social interactions with informants, in fact, has the potential to crucially affect their access to certain types of qualitative data. This access is important because, for some types of anthropological queries, it drastically affects our understanding of the phenomena about which we are striving to learn. In many ways, my questions here might appear rather simple—but it is sometimes those simple questions which can be cast aside and overlooked for so long. I wonder: are we approaching our research in a way that *invites* our informants to speak truthfully, and, without glossing over their spiritual viewpoints, openly speak with us in an interview setting? Further, are we approaching our research in ways where our informants would be comfortable enough to invite *us* to observe, or to even participate alongside, certain events? Or does the absence of conversations concerning our own metaphysical beliefs and quests—and, indeed, even our very disciplinary tendency towards secularist explanations and an *absence* of “talk about God”<sup>63</sup>—limit our access to qualitative data, thereby resulting in incomplete—if not inaccurate—explanations of the very emic views which we are striving to understand? In other words, do ethnographers experience any belief-related limitations in their attempts to collect qualitative data? Even subtle and seemingly mundane interactions—the glorious stuff that ethnographers spend plenty of time reflecting upon—have the potential to permit or deny us to access certain types of qualitative data.

Earlier (p.19 and p.25), I noted Geertz's assertion that anthropologists should be “neutral” when conducting their research. But such neutrality, I have contended throughout this chapter, is not possible or desirable on various grounds. I am not the first to recognise this limitation of Geertzian neutrality: for example, Ewing interrogates Geertz's recommendation that anthropologists adopt a stance of neutrality in their research and consequently suggests that such neutrality is an impossible standpoint. To decisively reveal the shortcomings of Geertz's concept of neutrality, Ewing provides a concrete example from her fieldwork in which she prevented a village-saint from giving Ewing's two-year-old daughter some sweets during a ritual celebration; the village-saint believed the sweets to have curative powers while Ewing considered the sweets, which she had seen to attract flies, to be disease-ridden. Because of

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<sup>63</sup> Bialecki, “Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism?”

Ewing's polite discretion and non-confrontation, in the Geertzian stance of neutrality, Ewing would have been classified as acting absolutely "neutral." However, she emphasises, her actions outed her as an atheist-outsider to the village-saint and all others who observed the incident. Thus, despite Ewing exercising restraint insofar as she did not vocalise her disbelief, she was ultimately, she argues, perceived to be an atheist-outsider rather than a neutral anthropologist.<sup>64</sup> My central point here is that the stance of Geertzian neutrality proved impossible in this case. This raises the question: how often do our refusals to personally participate in conversations related to metaphysical truth-claims while in the field—setting aside the fact that anthropologists have consciously bracketed out those very questions from their writing up due to disciplinary limitations—in turn portray us as disinterested in questions of truth? Put alternately, how might a perceived lack of belief—or a lack of interest in certain questions of belief—limit our access to data? I contend that this limitation happens often enough to merit addressing, and it is this conviction which motivated me to approach my PhD fieldwork with a posture of BIR.

The narrative—about Suhasini coming to my balcony and asking me to teach her about Jesus, and my subsequent awkward, and yet forthright, explanation that I do not believe in Christian teachings in the ways that her pastors do—with which I opened this chapter is, I suggest, an illustration of BIR. It is a case which highlights my choice to incorporate my beliefs and doubts about Protestant Christian doctrines into the conversations that I had throughout my ethnographic fieldwork at STA in 2016-2018. To be sure, I did not always share the same beliefs as my informants, but nor did I strive for a Geertzian form of neutrality; instead, I tried to speak openly and honestly about my beliefs and doubts—not only with Suhasini in this one conversational exchange, but with all of the individuals I encountered at STA. In addition to influencing or shaping my informants' understanding of what precisely I believed or did not believe, my willingness to speak openly about my own beliefs and doubts indicated a more general willingness and eagerness to understand, in turn, their own beliefs and doubts—I was evidently interested in, and committed to, discussing metaphysical truth.

My ideas for BIR originated during my MA fieldwork (2013-2015), when I encountered some belief-related limitations throughout the course of my ethnographic fieldwork amongst Charismatic Christians in Canada as a result of my effort to enact a Geertzian neutrality and to consistently methodologically bracket out my beliefs. During the course of that fieldwork, certain informants did not volunteer information during interviews until they first felt assured

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<sup>64</sup> Ewing, "Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe," 573.

that I shared, or I was at least conceptually open toward, their beliefs; others did not want to allow me to observe certain rituals due to what was perceived by them to be my lack of belief—I return to this point in more detail in the following subsections. My searching for, and ultimately adopting, a research posture which allowed me to *not* clinically “bracket out” questions of belief during the fieldwork that I conducted at STA for my PhD, then, is largely the result of my frustration, bewilderment, and reflection surrounding the limitations I encountered when trying my best to adopt methodological bracketing and neutrality as my research stance. Ethnographers, especially those of us who conduct our research alongside religious and spiritual communities, must wrestle with the reality that our beliefs (and our bracketing out of beliefs) can, and in my case did, limit or significantly alter our access to qualitative data in both interview and participant observation settings. Let us return to some ethnographic literature in order to explore these questions.

#### 1.4.1. *Information volunteered by interlocutors (Interviews)*

Firstly, let us consider some ways in which an anthropologist’s beliefs can shape the information volunteered by interlocutors in interview settings.

I am not here primarily concerned with whether or not reductionist interpretations should prevail in the writing up phases of anthropological research.<sup>65</sup> This question of reductionist interpretation is one that the anthropologist Edith Turner has addressed on multiple occasions, and I find some of her arguments intriguing but not entirely compelling.<sup>66</sup> Instead, my primary concern is with a researcher’s ability to establish an existential rapport with one’s informants, and to build up a symbiotic relationship where accurate and detailed information can be shared between informant and researcher. In the previous sections of this chapter, I documented the ways that I had reassessed my research posture in the light of this goal; and I have argued that a secularist-focused interpretive framework, and the subsequent secularist-focused research posture during fieldwork, is not always an appropriate or a helpful anthropological research posture. Moreover, I have myself experienced moments with Suhasini and others at STA—and also noted other anthropologists’ experiences—in which a perceived absence of shared belief between researcher and informant can sometimes inhibit informants

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<sup>65</sup> See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 11; 106–10. Milbank argues that the efforts of social scientists to bracket out questions of religious truth is a (sometimes unconscious) attempt to push matters of religion to the margins.

<sup>66</sup> Turner, “A Visible Spirit Form in Zambia”; Turner, “Our Lady of Knock”; Turner, *Among the Healers: Stories of Spiritual and Ritual Healing around the World*.

from sharing freely with anthropologists. We can see this conscious inhibition by informants playing out in Blanes's succinct documentation of his experience of admitting to one of his informants—an elder in the gypsy Pentecostal group that Blanes was studying—that Blanes was, in fact, an atheist. During their initial conversation, the elder asked Blanes which church he belonged to. Blanes, recalling the incident in his 2006 article, reports, “When I answered that I wasn’t a believer, he bluntly turned his back on me and spoke no more.”<sup>67</sup>

Let us consider, in more detail, a case from the fieldwork of Marie-Françoise Guédon as she documented it in 1994. Guédon notes that, during her ethnographic research among the Dené in Northern Canada, she was “tested by [her] instructors [informants who occupied a place of leadership in the community] before they gave an answer” to her questions concerning shamanic medicine.<sup>68</sup> She goes on to explain that her informants initially provided her with explanations of the same type and depth that they would usually provide to a young child; it was only upon Guédon sharing her own experiences with them (such as her dreams that resulted in her informants attributing to her the status of a spiritual healer) that individuals began to inform her more thoroughly about their own spiritual beliefs. As one of her informants said, “[there is no point in talking about certain things] to a white man, even an anthropologist, unless you knew he was going to understand.”<sup>69</sup> This insightful, succinct, and also poignant comment raises important questions about what it means to “understand” our informants and our research topics more broadly. Guédon’s informants wanted her to understand—and, indeed, *believe*—their own worldview in a conceptual or intellectual manner, but they also wanted her to vitally “understand” in a more personal, somatic, and experiential way. Crucially, it was her informants’ view that Guédon had arrived at her *own experiential understanding*, and also that she *shared some of their beliefs* or was at least open to exploring the possibility that her informants’ configuring of Guédon as a healer might indeed be metaphysically truthful, that led them, in turn, to relay their own beliefs and experiences more directly and thoroughly to her.

#### 1.4.2. *Observations accessed by researchers (participant observation)*

There are also instances in the ethnographic literature where a researcher’s worldview has affected the types of data they are able to access via participant observation. Anthropologist

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<sup>67</sup> Blanes, “The Atheist Anthropologist,” 228.

<sup>68</sup> Guédon, “Dene Ways and the Ethnographer’s Culture,” 52.

<sup>69</sup> Guédon, 43.

Jacob Loewen (1974) documents an account of working alongside a certain Christian missionary, David, in Panama. Despite their eagerness to be involved, David and Loewen were excluded from the community's healing rituals due to—somewhat ironically—what the community described as the missionaries' "lack of faith." The community interpreted certain biblical passages on healing (provided by the Christian missionaries themselves) to mean that authentic faith was required for healing results. But because Loewen and David were seen as favouring biomedical views of healing over the concept of faith-based prayer healing, the Christian community intentionally excluded them from the community's prayer time. Loewen recalls the leading men of the church apologetically pulling him aside and saying "I am sorry, but [the healing] doesn't work when you and David are in the circle. You and David don't really believe."<sup>70</sup> How might Loewen's ethnographic fieldwork have been altered had he been able to observe the healing rituals, an evidently important aspect of the community's practice? And, more generically, what types and depths of participant observation are ethnographers consistently prevented from accessing due to the ways in which they are perceived by their informants as lacking in genuine belief?

As I have indicated, I encountered some belief-related limitations during my former ethnographic work on spiritual healing in Charismatic Protestant communities (2013-2015).<sup>71</sup> The following vignette demonstrates that my informants' willingness to allow me to conduct participant observation depended heavily on their certification of my own belief: in the Charismatic Protestant spiritual healing community with whom I undertook ethnographic research, the universe is understood as being in a constant state of a spiritual battle where Christian soldiers are easily wounded. The entire cosmos is conceptualised as teeming with legions of evil spirits that—if given the opportunity—will distract, disrupt, torment or, possibly, violently possess an individual. Evil spirits are equipped with particular specialisations and abilities, and they are named after their sinister predilections—"Lust," "Trauma," "Death," etc. Accordingly, many of my informants described themselves as "soldiers" who are constantly on the spiritual battlefield where one's thoughts, actions, and even one's involuntary experiences, can "create an opening" for an evil spirit to wreak havoc in that individual's life. Charismatics thus see themselves not only as potential targets, but also as key players in this cosmic battle.

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<sup>70</sup> Referenced in Wilson, "Seeing They See Not," 202–4.

<sup>71</sup> Nadya Pohran, "Charismatic Healing: A Phenomenological Study of Spiritual Healing in Ottawa, Canada" (Master's thesis, University of Ottawa, 2015).

Four months into my ethnographic research, the topic of whether I could attend a “personal ministry appointment,” i.e. an individual prayer healing session, as a participant observer came up in casual conversation. Maureen, the woman who would receive the prayer healing session, was someone with whom I had formed a friendship, and it seemed to me that attending her session would be permissible on account of our mutual acquaintance. But this possibility of my attending as simply an allegedly *neutral* observer was met with hesitation by the “Lead” (the primary of the two Healers in any individual healing session). The “Lead’s” hesitations were due to her uncertainty about my own worldview and personal practices. Was I engaged in any sort of activity—deliberately or accidentally, known or unknown—that might “give territory” to an evil spirit? If and when any spirits were cast out of Maureen, would they simply enter me instead? Further, had I undergone the necessary rituals that would eradicate any existing evil spirits from me, or might I in fact invite, or even actively bring in, evil spirits into the prayer healing session by my very presence? And, even if I were willing to go through the cleansing rituals, would such rituals be effective on me without a proper and personal foundation of genuine faith that is thought to be necessary in order for the rituals to be efficacious? Even more generally, the spiritual healing community wanted assurance that the research process was “more than an academic exercise” for me. Indeed, many individuals were hesitant to share any of their more meaningful spiritual healing experiences—even in casual conversational settings—unless they were assured that I would find the process of learning from them enriching, or at least challenging, on a personal and spiritual level.<sup>72</sup>

I had already followed the advice that I received in the earliest stage of my research from an influential member of this Christian community: before beginning any formal interviews or participant observation sessions, I first attended a group spiritual healing retreat where I had my own “personal ministry appointment” with a Lead and a Second Healer. They had walked me through various reflections upon my life experiences and family lineages, and then prompted me to speak out certain prayers loudly in order to “break ungodly soul ties” that might be wreaking havoc in me. The specificities of this process were outside my own spiritual practices and beliefs, but I participated in all of it as best as I could—and my informants, including Maureen and the Healers who would be facilitating Maureen’s personal ministry appointment, knew that I had undergone my own personal ministry appointment. I am not sure

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<sup>72</sup> There are further research difficulties when the researcher is obligated to be a participant rather than strictly an observer. Susan Harding (1987) provides an excellent example of the difficulties of conducting participatory research amongst Baptists who practise different Charismatic traditions. Harding, “Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion.”

what else I could have done in order to become someone whom my informants would view as trustworthy, and whom they might be freely willing to invite as an observer of their practices. Yet, I was aware that it was my belief—or, in this particular case, my assumed lack of belief in the structures of their cosmological universe and their teachings of spiritual redemption—which continued to concern them. They wanted more than a mere inclination or willingness to participate. They wanted me to *know* not just in the sense of accumulating bits of information or even acquiring knowledge (in the sense of the French *savoir* or the German *wissen*) but also they wanted me to *intimately know* (*connaître* in French or *kennen* in German) my own healing. They wanted me to, deeply and truly, *believe*.

In the end, mainly due to the plea of Maureen who felt that my ability to observe the event would be of crucial importance to my developing understanding of the community's spiritual healing practices, I was invited to attend the session—but only on the condition that I remained at the far-side of the room and kept quiet; I unhesitatingly agreed. Observing the healing session first-hand turned out to be extraordinarily helpful to my understanding of the community's healing practices; it provided me with a much more nuanced grasp of the practices involved with healing, and also with some context for many of my later interviews. As far as I am concerned, the invitation to observe a personal healing was crucial in increasing my understanding of the phenomena. But the two Healers later commented on my attendance at Maureen's ministry session, and reflected regretfully that it was a mistake to have allowed me to attend at all. They speculated that my presence had changed the atmosphere substantially and was likely to be the reason that the healing had not been as efficacious as had been hoped for. To illustrate, the Lead gave me an example: “you know when we had Maureen lay down in the coffin and we called her up from the dead?<sup>73</sup> She didn't take it seriously. She caught your eye, smiled, and went along as if it were all a hoke [melodramatic] ritual. Because probably somewhere she knew that you weren't taking it seriously, either.”<sup>74</sup>

The controversies and the negotiations which unravelled due to my desire to attend Maureen's personal ministry session, and other similar moments, during my master's fieldwork were the first experiences which forced me to grapple with the question of my own belief as a researcher. Specifically, these experiences made me consider how my informants' perception of my belief shaped the qualitative data they allowed me to access: I began to wonder what else I might have missed out on observing due to the ways they perceived my belief. My

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<sup>73</sup> I explored this ritual in more detail in my MA thesis: this is a physical enactment of raising someone from the dead so to symbolise their new life in Christ and their freedom from past bondages.

<sup>74</sup> Nadya Pohran, fieldnotes. Ottawa, Canada. May 2015



reflections also led me to ask more generally: “What posture must anthropologists actively cultivate in order to demonstrate that they are willing to ‘take seriously’ the beliefs of their informants?” Motivated by this experience at the healing session, I began to understand that a researcher’s belief and the broader questions of truth-claims cannot be neatly quarantined from anthropological reflection and practice. Indeed, the anthropologist’s assessment of what is *really* happening out there matters vitally for the anthropologist’s craft, because it crucially affects, and even shapes, the data that we seek to, and are able to, access—both in interviews and in participant observation settings. To be sure, it is our informants who, to some extent, decide what we are able to have access to; yet, at the same time, the beliefs that we hold and the interpretative analytical frameworks that we choose to employ do play a significant role in influencing the decisions of the informants. If a researcher’s beliefs can indeed act as an access key to some kinds of qualitative data, it would seem that to consciously, or unconsciously, refrain from speaking of our beliefs and doubts might result in researchers being abruptly denied access to the very phenomena we wish to observe and understand. BIR, at least—we can recall my extensive caveats listed in Section 1.1—in *some* instances, could solve this dilemma.

### 1.5. ADOPTING A BELIEF-INCLUSIVE RESEARCH POSTURE

Having explored some motivations and arguments for defending BIR and also the possible merits of BIR, it is worth explicitly stating that BIR was a research posture that I adopted from my very first day at STA. For example, when I first met Acharya Ghosh in August 2016, after I answered some of his practical questions which clarified what I was studying, where I had come from, and how long I intended to stay, he promptly asked me, “how much of the Bible do you read?” In return, I sought some clarification from him: did he mean how much of the Bible am I currently reading (i.e. the continuous present) or how much have I read over the past number of years? “Both,” he replied. “How much have you ever read throughout all your years, but also how much do you read now?”, was his question. My answer, which remained stable throughout the many other times I was asked this question during my fieldwork, asserted my familiarity and family-involvement with forms of Protestant Christianity: I had been deeply and keenly involved in my church’s youth group as a teenager, I was able to quote large sections of the Bible from memory, and I had once had a very regular prayer life—but all of this, I always clarified, was in the past. Indeed, I would clarify to my informants, I was very interested in exploring religious perspectives outside the Christian traditions that I had grown up in. But, at the same time, I retained a keen interest in some

Christian teachings and in the person of Jesus. I frequently (sometimes with a smile) simply used the English word “confused” when I was asked “and what are *you*?” in the context of religious affiliation. Acharya Ghosh noted my confusion and proceeded to ask if it was my academic queries which had caused it; he then quoted a passage from the New Testament (1 Corinthians 8) which says that “knowledge puffs up” and can not only confuse people but can also cause them to stumble. “Perhaps,” I nodded to him, “it is through my studies that I began to have some of this confusion. But I think I am still seeking, and I am hopefully coming closer to the things Jesus taught about. I hope I am not ‘puffed up,’ and if I am stumbling I think it is a sort of falling down in the midst of grasping for *something*—not a stumbling like going down the completely wrong path.”

No doubt, identifying myself in such terms as an uncertain spiritual seeker cast me in a certain light in the eyes of my informants who often had more robustly formed Christian standpoints. (Just as it will, no doubt, cast me in a certain light also in the eyes of my secular academic colleagues who read this confession.) Some of the ashramites at STA were relieved to know that I was not another “one of *those* foreigners” who had never learned a single thing about the Bible; conversely, some others lamented that I was now “lapsing” in my faith; and I would not be at all surprised to learn that there was a range of other views about me at STA that I was never privy to. But, I contend, my self-identification as a genuine seeker, and as someone who had already established (and seemed to want to strengthen) a spiritual practice that revolved around Jesus also gave me access to certain types of conversations and certain types of observations to which I do not think I would otherwise have been privy. In this latter category, I can include plenty of moments from conversations with my friends and fellow ashramites such as Suhasini, Anil, Mr. Pratyush, and Uncle William (who, because they knew that I was someone who both believed and doubted, shared certain moments of their own beliefs and doubts with me); with individuals who occupy leadership roles within the ashram structure such as Acharya Ghosh (current Acharya), Vijay Patni (current Manager of STA), Eileen Richards (former Hostess of STA), and Lillian Wallace (former Manager of STA); as well as with participants of WA.

In the chapters that follow, my BIR posture should be kept in mind; though I do not explicitly identify the various BIR-inflected ways that led me to have such conversations, I believe that, more often than not, it was my intentional inclusion of my religious beliefs and doubts which allowed me to access some of the data that I present throughout the remainder of this work. That being said, all individuals possess multiple facets which collectively comprise

their existential and social identities; *individuals* who conduct social research (whose individualities are sometimes made murky by the striking generic term “researchers”) are no exception to this, and I do not wish to give the impression that my religious beliefs and doubts comprise more of my identity than other aspects of me.<sup>75</sup> Undoubtedly, my whiteness, femaleness, foreignness, age, and economic status (among other facets of my identity) would surely have influenced the ways in which I was perceived by my informants. Still, I contend, the specifically *religious* aspects of my identity as a researcher of *religious* phenomena merited further exploration due to the ways that religious beliefs were of particular importance to the Protestant community with which I conducted my fieldwork.

## 1.6. CONCLUSION: ARTICULATING SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF BIR

As much as I have interrogated in this chapter the seemingly common practice of researchers not speaking of their (religious) beliefs and doubts during their fieldwork conversations, and as much as I desire for researchers to have the institutional encouragement and eager backing of the anthropological discipline to feel that they can occasionally choose to intentionally include their beliefs in the course of their ethnographic research, there are some problematic implications of BIR which need to be considered. I am not so bold as to think that I will effectively address (or even identify) all of them here, but I present the following concluding reflections as one additional step forward in an ongoing conversation.

Of course, there are and will always be a number of researchers who cannot be “believers”—at least not in the fully committed ways our informants might desire us to be. For example, some anthropologists work alongside research communities which hold beliefs that are distinctly unpalatable to the researcher: speaking candidly of his view of his informants, Leo Coleman confesses, “...in short, I didn’t like some of the people I had to participate with as I observed them, and I didn’t like their politics.”<sup>76</sup> Other anthropologists, while having no specific moral or ethical disagreements with the beliefs held by their informants, simply cannot adopt these same beliefs as their own. This happened to me many times during my fieldwork at STA: I can recall one poignant moment when Shreya, a young and fervent student of the SoE, asked me to join a small group who would pray to Jesus for her, requesting Jesus to powerfully intervene in a difficult family situation and heal her uncle’s illness. “The Bible

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<sup>75</sup> In their respective recent works, Lori Beaman and Muthuraj Swamy have both argued that, even in *religious* contexts, an individual’s *religious* identity is only one facet of their identity. Beaman, *Deep Equality*; Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*.

<sup>76</sup> Coleman, “The Obligation to Receive: The Countertransference, the Ethnographer, Protestants, and Proselytization in North India,” 116,118.

says,” Shreya told me with faith-filled conviction, “that if we believe, then Jesus will heal.” I had come to like Shreya very much during the weeks we spent together at STA, and I would have loved to tell her: “*absolutely* I will pray to Jesus with the others!” But my belief (or lack thereof) did not permit me to say such a thing about intercessory prayer—or, at least, my (Protestant-shaped) conscience did not allow me to. Sometimes, some beliefs are simply not attainable. Keeping what we might call the *intrinsic limitations* of belief in mind, at this point, we might ask: What are the implications of BIR for an anthropologist who is, unbudgingly, atheistic with regard to their informants’ deeply-held religious beliefs? Does this seeming incompatibility of belief between researcher and informant entail that such researchers simply will not be able to access crucial qualitative data? To this legitimate and pressing question, I cautiously answer: “Perhaps.” After all, as we saw in Section 1.1, this particular atheistic vantage point can lead to access to other, equally-unique, data points.<sup>77</sup>

There are further pragmatic questions to consider. What about the social reality that a “community” of informants is not entirely homogenous in their beliefs, so that an ethnographer simply cannot share their own beliefs with every individual alongside whom they are conducting research? Along similar lines, in a single research context—even a Protestant Christian one—there very well may be, as was the case for the anthropologist Blanes conducting fieldwork alongside gypsy Pentecostals, some informants for whom the question of a researcher’s personal belief is important, while other informants remain, in Blanes’s words, “not at all interested” in a researcher’s religious beliefs.<sup>78</sup> Which beliefs are then to be given precedence and deemed to be the *most* important in gaining access to the qualitative data which, I have argued, hinges around a perceived shared belief between research and informant? Religious beliefs? Or beliefs about justice, politics, social systems, environmental crises, gender roles and gender fluidity, science and the laws of nature, education? While I have focused primarily on beliefs concerning religious viewpoints in this chapter, there is no restriction to the type of beliefs that can be considered within the broader concept of BIR. One must also consider whether, if I am indeed correct in suggesting that some measure of shared belief has the potential to lead to a greater depth of access to qualitative research, a researcher could be justified in simply pretending to believe so as to potentially gain more access and greater insight into the phenomenon. To what extent, if at all, are mere professions of belief ethically permissible? And what of the reality that, recalling our subtle yet important nuance

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<sup>77</sup> Gordon, “Getting Close by Staying Distant: Fieldwork with Proselytizing Groups.”

<sup>78</sup> Blanes, “The Atheist Anthropologist,” 226.

articulated towards the beginning of this chapter (p.21-22) no matter what the precise details are of a researcher's own beliefs, the informants will inevitably form their own conclusions about the researcher's beliefs which may or may not align with the ways that the researcher understands their own beliefs?

I raise these questions in a somewhat rhetorical fashion to indicate that they tend to arise in the messy in-between where researcher and informant become entangled as they explore each other's views about the human self and its locations in social contexts. This brings us to another matter of considerable importance which we have raised in the introductory chapter: in considering BIR as a viable and desirable research posture, the particular divisive lines between the disciplines of anthropology and theology will have to be explored and articulated. An in-depth engagement with these questions is beyond the scope of this work, but there are recent conversations taking place between anthropology and theology, and I have found Joel Robbins's preliminary thoughts on what anthropology can "take," i.e. to learn and to adopt/adapt, from theology to be very helpful in this regard.<sup>79</sup> Of the three ways that Robbins suggests anthropologists can learn from theologians, I find his third suggestion to be most intriguing: "anthropologists would have to imagine that theologians might either produce theories that get some things right about the world they currently get wrong or model a kind of action in the world that is in some or other way more effective or ethically adequate than their own."<sup>80</sup> Though, as Robbins himself emphasises, what he has articulated thus far regarding what anthropologists can learn from theologians is only a starting point, it is nonetheless an important starting point.

In this vein of anthropologists learning from theologians, we can consider one particularly helpful and thought-provoking idea proposed by the Christian theologian Christopher Morse in order to pick up, and elaborate upon, a point that we mentioned only briefly in Section 1.1: Christian theology itself is wrought with what Morse calls "faithful disbelief."<sup>81</sup> Amongst a community of Christians, there is a shared understanding of what one should *not* believe; these shared *disbeliefs* can sometimes be a more-than-adequate doctrinal basis for solidarity. That is to say: Morse highlights that it is through faithfully disbelieving what is *not* of God that Christian groups can be formed and sustained. Taking Morse's insight—that specific doctrinal beliefs *exclusively* need not be shared in order to form a sense

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<sup>79</sup> Robbins, "The Anthropology of Christianity: Unity, Diversity, New Directions. An Introduction to Supplement 10."; Robbins, "Anthropology and Theology."

<sup>80</sup> Robbins, "Anthropology and Theology," 287.

<sup>81</sup> Morse, *Not Every Spirit*.

of intuitional cohesion—and then applying it more generally, we could, in turn, consider the following: perhaps, even though I do not share the same doctrinal *beliefs* as my informants, there may be something more generic which binds us together. That is to say, even though I am an anthropologist who does not hold the same set of doctrinal beliefs and the same types of doubts as (some of) my Protestant Christian informants, it is nonetheless precisely my theological preoccupation with belief, and my unrelenting Protestantism-shaped emphasis on the importance of belief, which might be enough to establish a sufficient measure of solidarity with and, consequently, gain the trust of, my Christian informants.<sup>82</sup> Put alternately: my belief *that belief matters* may be significant enough so as to suffice—at least as a starting point—for gaining access to the types of qualitative data that I have been concerned with herein.

Suffice it to say, encouraging a researcher to not habitually place aside the question of metaphysical truths, but instead to consider adopting BIR as a research posture, brings along with it a plethora of questions and difficulties. These difficulties and unanswered questions notwithstanding, I contend that we need more conceptual space in anthropology for ethnographers to adopt, cultivate, and sustain a stance of belief when conducting their fieldwork and writing up their ethnography. We need a methodological posture like BIR to be not only tolerated but actively encouraged so that individuals within the wider anthropological community can confidently choose to approach their research with a posture of belief without worrying that they are betraying the normatively secular foundations of their discipline, or worrying that they will be “found out” by colleagues and dismissed as one who has foolishly gone native.<sup>83</sup> Embracing such a posture will, I speculate, involve some significant rethinking of the ways that we advise young anthropologists to approach their fieldwork—but the potential fruits of this change is well worth the inevitable toils involved.

In the edited volume *Reinventing Anthropology*, Bob Sholte argues that “intellectual paradigms, including anthropological traditions, are culturally mediated, that is they are contextually situated and relative...if anthropological activity is culturally mediated, it is in turn subject to ethnographic description and ethnological analysis.”<sup>84</sup> While Sholte is not advocating for a form of meta-ethnography (whereby, for example, an anthropologist conducts an ethnographic study amongst anthropologists who themselves are conducting ethnographic

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<sup>82</sup> With gratitude to Joel Robbins and my fellow PhD students in our Anthropology of Christianity group who met during my time at the University of Cambridge. This topic came up in our discussion of an earlier draft of this chapter, and I am grateful for the collective thoughts and insights that were shared with me.

<sup>83</sup> Turner, “A Visible Spirit Form in Zambia.”

<sup>84</sup> Scholte, “Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology,” 432.

studies), he draws our attention to the often-overlooked reality that anthropologists are themselves part of a wider cultural community whose actions and beliefs are influenced by their surrounding environments. If, in simple terms, we can describe cultural anthropology as a discipline which concludes that “research participant X acts in a particular way largely due to the cultural influences of Y and Z,” then we must be willing to envision the very discipline of cultural anthropology in a similar fashion. That is, “anthropologist X acts in a particular manner largely due to the cultural influences of Y and Z.” The anthropologist’s beliefs and actions, *qua* anthropologist, have not been formed in a cultural vacuum; we can—and, as erudite scholars, we *should*—interrogate these very beliefs and practices related to the ways we approach our research. The ways that anthropologists approach their craft are the result of a series of numerous interactions, teaching-moments, textbook instructions, and even anecdotes shared amongst anthropologist peers on the way to (and at) the local pub. Some of these influences are fairly explicit—such as the moments of formal mentorship and instruction which anthropologists undergo—while others can be more implicit—such as reading ethnographies and subtly absorbing the methodological tendencies embodied and portrayed within them, or noting a striking absence of conversations relating to the researcher’s beliefs and doubts. Not all of these influences need to be uncritically and unwaveringly adhered to. This chapter has looked at the disciplinary influences that have shaped the adoption by some anthropologists of methodological bracketing as their normative research posture and, subsequently, has argued that anthropology as a discipline needs to make space for researchers to include their own (religious) beliefs and doubts in the fieldwork process. It has argued, in sum, that BIR should not be elevated as *the* best or *the* sole way to do fieldwork—even though it might *sometimes* lead to more interesting or useful results. At other times it might not. Still, at the very least, BIR should be an accepted posture of fieldwork because it has the potential to broaden our access to qualitative data. And *that*, after all, is what we cultural anthropologists are after.

## Chapter 2:

# FOREIGNNESS OR INDIANNESS? INDIGENISATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

As will become clear in Chapter 3, Jones's visions for STA, although unique in their own respect, must also be understood in the contexts of the multiple and diverse interactions that Christianity has had with various people in specific locations of the Indian subcontinent over the last two millennia. To be sure, Jones's visions did not exist in a cultural or missiological vacuum; they were profoundly shaped by the long and somewhat complicated relationships that some Indians had developed with Christianity since 52 CE, when the apostle Thomas is said to have visited India, resulting in the formation of the Nasrani communities (more commonly referred to as the Syrian Christians or St. Thomas Christians) in Kerala. Centuries later, various foreign powers brought with them their Christian beliefs and practices which had been shaped by European cultures—the Portuguese introduced Roman Catholicism when they arrived on the western coast in 1498, and the British subsequently introduced forms of Protestant and Anglican Christianities during the periods of the Company Rule (1757-1858) and the Crown Rule (1858-1947). Additionally, spurred on largely by the nineteenth-century development of cultural formations called the “Bengal renaissance,” and also resonating with the indigenisation practices of much earlier figures such as the Roman Catholic missionary Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), both Indian Christians and European missionaries actively practised and sometimes publicly advocated what would today be broadly referred to as styles of “inculturated” Christianity. It is worth making explicit that the word “inculturation” itself was not commonly used until the 1960s—approximately three decades after Jones had established STA—and so in this discussion I am retroactively applying the term to individuals and leaders of religious movements who would not have described themselves as consciously enacting “inculturation.” However, I use it—sometimes interchangeably with “indigenised” or “Indianised”—as a shorthand expression for the actions and attitudes relating to these earlier attempts to interweave Christianity into Indic milieus through the use of cultural idioms and ritual practices that were common in various Indian contexts. The term that Jones himself



eventually used for this process, as we shall see in Chapter 3, is “naturalization.”<sup>1</sup> I do not know the extent of Jones’s own awareness of the details of the diverse, and at times problematic, interactions between Christianity and Indian cultures; nonetheless, the aspects that I will outline of the historical interactions that Christianity has had with Indian cultures are highly significant, because, I argue, it is these details which influenced and shaped (even if only at a level of unconscious response) several of Jones’s decisions with regard to the conceptualisation and formation of STA. Consequently, to set the stage for the next chapter which explores Jones’s founding visions for the ashram, this chapter explores some of the historical trajectories of the presences of Christianity in India, and also contextualises some of the key associations that the Indian public at large have developed about Christianity as a result of these historical interactions. In these trajectories, we can see several missionaries’ attempts to bring Christian messages into Indian cultures; these approaches are important so as to be able to understand the unique, as well as the shared, aspects of Jones’s own missiological approach.

More specifically, Section 2.2 summarises some of the key interactions that two European powers—Portugal and Britain—have had with Syrian Christian communities, and then articulates the ways in which these interactions have broadly led to the perception of Christianity as a religion of foreigners. I first provide an introduction to the sociohistorical locations of Syrian Christian communities, and subsequently examine some of the ways that both the Portuguese and the British tried to apply corrective measures to Syrian Christian beliefs and practices. I also examine some of the policies and attitudes that these colonists adopted with regard to Hindu socioreligious institutions and practices. Though STA has no structural links with Syrian Christianity, Syrian Christian communities are relevant for our consideration because they epitomise an early expression of indigenised Christianity—the type of Christianity on which Jones was focused. Through examining the ways that these European colonial powers interacted with Syrian Christian communities, I demonstrate that these contested engagements have often been driven by European missionaries who, while interacting with certain Indianised expressions of Christianity, diagnosed these configurations as inauthentic, defective, or just plainly erroneous, and consequently attempted to repair, reform, and re-align them with what the Europeans regarded as doctrinally orthodox. Through this study of some of the attitudes and actions of missionaries from both Portugal and Britain, we can see that these colonial powers implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—associated their

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<sup>1</sup> In his PhD thesis on Jones’s missionary contributions, Paul A.J. Martin also identifies “naturalization” as the “nearest equivalent to ‘indigenisation.’” Martin, “Missionary of the Indian Road,” 126.

own Christian beliefs and practices with the normative systems of European cultures. This section is not meant to be an exhaustive historical survey of the relationships between Christianity and Indians in the early precolonial centuries—though through it, I seek to provide adequate contexts which will help us to understand these interactions especially in the last three hundred years or so leading up to, and also shaping, the sociocultural contexts in which Jones would attempt his own styles of inculturation. Thus, it seeks to demonstrate that foreign missionaries in Indian contexts have often rejected and/or attempted to *normalise* the religious practices not only of non-Christians, but also, crucially, of local Christians. I demonstrate that these frequent and calculated historical efforts to correct local expressions of Christianity feed into the public opinion within India, especially over the last two hundred years or so, that Christianity is a religion imported by foreigners; consequently, according to this view, Christianity ought to be associated not with an Indian identity but with a Western or European identity.

Next, Section 2.3 focuses on some specific examples of Christian inculturation in India which pre-date the establishment of STA in 1930. I highlight certain aspects of indigenisation attempted by several key individuals who are consistently referenced by scholars as having practised a form of Christianity that was understood by their Indian contemporaries themselves not as “foreign” but as authentically “Indian.” Some of the individuals whom I explore were foreign missionaries who intentionally sought to practise, and thereby inspire, a Christian lifestyle which did not stand out disjunctively from, but could rather seem to blend into their local Indian cultural milieus. Other individuals whom I look at in this regard are Indians—many of whom were born into upper-caste Hindu families—who, upon learning more about Christianity, began to actively incorporate some Christian beliefs and practices into their Hindu worldviews, thereby blurring the lines of what some European missionaries had formerly conceptualised as a rigid dichotomy whereby one was *either* Hindu *or* Christian. Their lifestyles and writings paved the way for broadening Christianity beyond its specifically Western expressions and, through concretely embodying and living out a Christianity that was steeped in Indian cultural idioms, they consequently challenged the notion that Christianity was to be exclusively associated with foreign cultures. But this establishment of an *Indianised* or *inculturated* Christianity was also, as I shall show towards the end of this chapter, heavily inflected by the sociocultural and political discourses of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that articulated, from some majoritarian Hindu nationalist perspectives, precisely what an Indian identity should look like and, accordingly, also the shape that an *Indianised* Christianity would have to

take. Consequently, I argue that the types of inculturated Christianity that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were deeply influenced by the emerging notion that being Indian was to be associated not only with being Hindu, but also with being a proponent of particular strands of Hinduism that contained specifically Brahmanical and Advaita Vedantic undertones. In (unconsciously) embracing this specific expression of Hinduism as *the* way to be Indian, Jones himself, in his attempts to “naturalize” Christianity, often ignored the diverse forms of Indianness that were being played out outside such Hindu contexts. This broad sweeping understanding of what it means to be Indian will be a key part of our discussions in Chapters 3 and 4.

There are two further sociopolitical realities which are so significant that it would be negligent on my part to leave them totally unaddressed in this discussion. I do not engage in detail with these because, for the most part, they post-date the establishment of STA while I am concerned primarily with the socio-cultural and political influences leading up to Jones’s founding of STA in 1930. However, they are important developments to keep in mind when exploring the questions of foreignness and inculturation, and they merit some discussion. Firstly, the various practices of inculturation raised suspicions among some Vedantically-oriented Hindu intellectuals, who accused Christian missionaries of being deceitful swindlers who were nefariously using the idioms of inculturation to harvest souls for Christ through conversions. We see such suspicions and accusations expressed, and responded to, in a series of letters exchanged between Bede Griffiths (a contemporary of Henri le Saux a.k.a. Swami Abhishiktananda who, along with Jules Monchanin, played a key role in establishing the well-known Saccidananda or Shantivanam (Christian) ashram in South India) and Swami Devananda in the late 1980s<sup>2</sup>, as well as a second series of letters exchanged between Griffiths and Ram Swarup around 1990.<sup>3</sup> In their respective correspondences, both Hindu men accusingly labelled Griffiths’s and other Christians’ blending of Hindu philosophies with Christian practices as an intentional act of trickery and deception, claiming that the Christians’ primary concern was to gain converts at whatever cost. Such accusations drew from, and contributed to, the broader sociopolitical debates within India regarding the ethics of conversion—a debate which intensified when, in October 1999, Swami Dayananda Saraswati articulated his now well-known claim that conversion is “an act of violence” which “breeds

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<sup>2</sup> Goel, *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or Swindlers?*, 118–44.

<sup>3</sup> Goel, 167–76.

violence” and should not be tolerated.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the strong associations of inculturation with Vedantic philosophical thought and contemplative practices were also critiqued by some Dalit Christian theologians, who gained increased institutional momentum and political visibility from the 1980s onwards, and asserted that “Indianness” (and therefore inculturated Christianity) should not be predominantly or explicitly associated with Vedanta, as if Vedanta were the epitome of Indian culture. This array of Christian theological voices which rejected the association of Indianness with Vedanta (which are now collectively referred to as Dalit theology) emphasises that Christianity should also reflect the cultural idioms and the subaltern experiences of socioeconomic marginalisation of the Dalits, rather than focus predominantly on Brahmanical forms of life.<sup>5</sup> Among these figures are Arvind P. Nirmal (North India) and Vedanayagam Devasahayam (South India) who have popularised the articulations of Dalit theology and are responsible for writing some of its most influential texts.<sup>6</sup> I will return, in slightly greater detail, to the impact that Dalit theology has had on styles of Indian Christianity in Chapter 4 when I discuss the shifts that occurred at STA with the formation of the SoE in the 1990s. At this point in our exploration, this brief discussion of these two significant disputes relating to the normative visions of Hindu identity will have to suffice.

Due to spanning the massive temporal period between 52 CE and the present day, this historical overview of the interactions between Christianity and Indian locales, including the sub-field of Indian Christianity, will be an outline of certain distinctive phases. More nuanced explorations of these historical interactions can be found in the magisterial study of Robert Eric Frykenberg<sup>7</sup>, the multiple volumes on the history of Christianity in India published by the Church History Association of India<sup>8</sup>, as well as the works of other scholars of Indian Christianity—many of whom I refer to throughout this chapter. There are also several works which have mapped out the terrain of Christian missionary activity in India.<sup>9</sup> The contents of the subsequent chapters—which focus respectively on Jones’s visions for STA in 1930 (Chapter 3); the ways that in the 1990s STA began to develop programmes aimed at new

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<sup>4</sup> Roberts, “Is Conversion a Colonization of Consciousness,” 272.

<sup>5</sup> Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 2010; Bauman, *Christian Identity*; Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Nirmal and Devasahayam, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*.

<sup>7</sup> Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present*.

<sup>8</sup> Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)*; Hambye, *History of Christianity in India: Eighteenth Century*; Grafe, *History of Christianity in India: Tamil Nadu in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*; Downs, *History of Christianity in India: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.

<sup>9</sup> Haskell Khan, “The India Mission Field in American History, 1919-1947.”

converts to Christianity (Chapter 4); and how the leaders of STA interacted with the WA group in the early 2000s (Chapter 5)—make it especially important for us to understand these competing identities of Christianity as “foreign” and as “inculturated,” for these seemingly opposite identities crucially undergird the ethos of STA.

## 2.2. ASSOCIATING CHRISTIANITY WITH FOREIGNNESS

### 2.2.1. *The Syrian Christians of India: their origins and practices*

The history of Syrian Christians is documented in detail in various comprehensive and well-written monographs, as well as in numerous volumes on the history of Christianity in India.<sup>10</sup> A brief introduction to the Syrian Christians’ origins and socio-ritual practices will provide us with the necessary materials with which to explore the ways that colonial powers and foreign missionaries later interacted with Syrian Christian communities and imperiously sought to establish their own expressions of Christianity as superior to, or more accurate than, those of Syrian Christians, thereby setting in motion certain processes that would later generate the notion that Christianity is a religion of foreigners. When the Portuguese and the British came to India, they brought with them different expressions of Christianity (Roman Catholic Christianity and Protestant or Anglican Christianity, respectively) which, to varying degrees, they endeavoured to impress upon Hindus and other non-Christian individuals, thereby forming communities of converts. But, even more importantly, they used their own expressions of Christianity as a measuring stick with which they normatively assessed, and sought to regulate, the beliefs and practices of both the already existing Syrian Christian communities and the other Indians who had recently converted to their form of Christianity.

During the first fourteen centuries or so of their existence, Syrian Christians grew in numbers not by conversion but simply by reaping the benefits of being a relatively wealthy and well-respected, and therefore socially comfortable, caste-based community whose members were able to consistently reproduce. Though the bulk of their population, to this day, continues to live in present-day Kerala, Syrian Christians did occasionally migrate to other parts of India

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<sup>10</sup> Mathew and Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*; Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*; Zachariah, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century*; Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India: From the Middle of the Sixteenth to the End of the Seventeenth Century (1542-1700)*, II:19–138; Hambye, *History of Christianity in India: Eighteenth Century*, III:65–90; Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*, 26–48. Mundadan, *Sixteenth Century Traditions of St. Thomas Christians*.

and expand their ecclesiastical boundaries, as is evidenced by the records which document details such as the number of churches that they constructed in those parts or the different sorts of honours that were given to them, such as the copper plates which were issued by the ruler of Kollam (in Kerala) in 849 CE and which contain some of the most important historical inscriptions regarding Kerala.<sup>11</sup> Syrian Christians share a number of rituals with Brahmanical Hindus, including various rites of passage relating to birth, coming of age, marriage and death, as well as some beliefs and social exclusivities with regard to untouchability and other pollution rituals.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that some Syrian Christians inherited or adopted these wider Hindu classifications of social hierarchy and sought to maintain the status symbols of their upper-caste Hindu neighbours. There is some evidence which demonstrates that they also maintained the upper-caste practice of regarding individuals from the lower castes as ritually impure: for instance, individuals from the lower castes were traditionally not allowed to enter Syrian Christian households.<sup>13</sup> Keeping in mind these resemblances to Brahmanical Hinduism, we can turn now to the ways that European powers interacted during their colonial rules with the Syrian Christians.

### 2.2.2. *The Portuguese Colonial Influences in Goa*

In 1498, some Portuguese Catholic Christians, under their captain Vasco da Gama, arrived at Kozhikode (Calicut) in Kerala. Vasco da Gama incorrectly deemed a local Hindu temple (most likely a Kali temple) to be a Christian place of worship. Scholars have speculated that the devotees at this temple might have been calling out either “*Maari*” (a name of the goddess Kali) or “*Maari*” (“get out of the way”), an invocation which da Gama and his men presumably heard as “Mary” and interpreted to mean that the people were worshipping the Virgin Mary. Thus, da Gama, too, began to show reverence and instructed his men to join him in worshipping the Virgin there.<sup>14</sup> Da Gama’s error has been documented and explored by a number of scholars, and fuller accounts of it can be found elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> In brief, da Gama not only incorrectly assumed that the Hindu men they encountered were Christians, but also he

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<sup>11</sup> Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*.

<sup>13</sup> Abraham, “Negotiating Hinduism and Christianity in the History of Kerala”; Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ravenstein, *A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco Da Gama, 1497-1499*; Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)*, I:243–54.

See, also, the diary entry of one of da Gama’s men, which describes the scene from a first-hand perspective. Peres, Baiao, and Basto, *Diario Da Viagem de V. Da Gama*, 66–68.

mistook the temple, the religious statues, and the practices of worship as being of a Christian provenance. I suggest that there are at least three distinct possible explanations for his error: first, he was simply not intelligent enough to discern significant differences—but this is rather unlikely, given his high rank and responsibilities; second, he was aware that the religious place was not Christian, but, for some reason, deviously led his men to believe that it was a Christian place; third, it never occurred to him that there might, in fact, be a deity or a place of worship which was other than, and historically disconnected with, Christianity. I take the third scenario to be the most likely explanation—especially since one must bear in mind that da Gama possessed no language skills vis-à-vis the Indic vernaculars, had very limited foreknowledge of the cultural worlds he was venturing into (for instance, the Portuguese believed that the three biblical Magi came from India, and they did not have any substantial knowledge about India other than a report that the Indians were Christians<sup>16</sup>), and after his long journey of several months at sea he might have had a certain measure of the Portuguese sentiment of “*saudade*”—an aching and longing for the familiar. This nostalgia, even if only at some subconscious level, could have deeply affected his interpretation of the scenes he was met with upon arriving on Indian soil.

This third possible explanation of da Gama’s error has also recently been put forward by Alexander Henn, who suggests that the Portuguese Christians were slow to recognise expressions of Hinduism as being independent of Christianity because they failed to truly see the differences, which they perceived as nothing other than distorted forms of Christian spirituality. Henn explains, “Ironically, this recognition [i.e. of non-Christian religions such as Hinduism] was delayed in the early-modern period not because the gentiles were, as was done later in classical modernity, conceived as the radical and racial Other, but because they were perceived as hidden and distorted forms of the religious Self.”<sup>17</sup> If we explore this dialectic of the Other as a thinly veiled replica of the Same, then da Gama’s apparent embracing of Hindu expressions of spirituality, which he viewed through his Catholic prisms of Marian devotion, is not an example of religious pluralism and tolerance for other religious views understood in the sense of respecting the Other in its Otherness. Rather, it is an exemplary case study of what might happen when one encounters an expression of genuine difference for which our existing worldview has not prepared us. In such cases, precisely the glaring differences could paradoxically become oblivious to us because of our cognitive blind-spots. Henn summarises

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<sup>16</sup> Robinson, “Sixteenth Century Conversions to Christianity in Goa,” 301.

<sup>17</sup> Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*, 39.

this encounter thus: “In simpler terms, the problem was how to acknowledge a religion other than Christianity if, by scholastic definition and orthodox belief, Christianity was the only religion or ‘Truth’ possible.”<sup>18</sup> After all, we are inclined—or, if I can be more assertive and speak with Kantian vocabularies, we are primed—to categorically interpret the world only through the experiential and conceptual frameworks that we already have within our grasp. Recently, scholars in the fields of psychiatry and neuroscience too have confirmed that even the most basic elements of human vision (i.e. literal sight) are performed by a “predictive brain” which takes in those elements of reality that, based on prior experiences, it “expects” to see in the first place, while effectively blocking out any elements that are unexpected.<sup>19</sup> This biological model of inevitably limited perceptions which are based on former life experiences on European landscapes plays out, on more ethnographic terrain, in da Gama’s experience-*as* of the individuals whom he “saw” as Christians at the temple in Kozhikode, and further illuminates Nin’s reflection quoted in Chapter One (Section 1.3.1). In other words, da Gama could not *truly* see the Hindus as anything other than (alternative or covert forms of) Christians, because his former experiences had not prepared or enabled him to envision that anyone other than Christians existed. To borrow the words of Jesus: though “seeing”, da Gama “saw not.”<sup>20</sup>

It can be interesting to probe deeper into the questions of *how* and *why* da Gama managed to confuse a Hindu community for a Christian one—Henn skillfully prompts his readers to undertake this reflection by guiding them through a range of scholarship which contains substantially different viewpoints on the topic.<sup>21</sup> However, for our purposes, I am more interested in examining how this initial interaction compares to the subsequent interactions that the Portuguese had with religious communities in India.<sup>22</sup> Assuming that da Gama did earnestly believe that the individuals at the temple were practising some form of Christianity, it is noteworthy that his initial response was to join them in worshipping the Virgin Mary (or, at least he assumed that he was joining them in a *Christian* act of worship) rather than to either keep his distance from a practice that seemed to be an utterly distorted form of Christian worship or to vehemently denounce it as infernal or heathenish and in need of refinement and

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<sup>18</sup> Henn, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Hohwy, *The Predictive Mind*.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 13:13

<sup>21</sup> Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*, 21–27.

<sup>22</sup> Some scholars argue that da Gama quickly fixed his error and corrected his perception of the presence of religion as soon as he understood that the men were in fact practising a religion well outside the Abrahamic faiths. But other scholars argue that the Portuguese held a “tolerant attitude” with regard to religious pluralism and diverse modes of spirituality. Henn, 20–28.



correction. Indeed, while it may be true that da Gama's seeming acceptance of what he encountered was not, in fact, a conscious embracing of Hindu religious practices as understood by Hindus themselves, it still suggests that he was willing to participate in a style of Christian worship that looked remarkably different than his own. Thus, taking a different line of analysis than Henn, my crucial point is this: the fact that da Gama wrongly envisioned the Kozhikode *temple* as a *Christian* place of worship *also* suggests that he possessed some degree of existential and conceptual openness (no matter how ill-informed) towards different ways of practising Christianity. This initial display of openness—no matter that it arose from incorrect assumptions—is particularly interesting because, as I shall demonstrate, the Portuguese did *not* later maintain such hospitality to doctrinal and ritual expressions of Christianity which appeared to be different than their own.

As time progressed and as the Portuguese colonial presence in India strengthened, it was not just that the Portuguese eventually began to focus on changing the beliefs and practices of the Syrian Christians in India so as to more closely align them with the ways their own Roman Catholicism was practised; indeed, they first went to great lengths to convert Hindus<sup>23</sup> to Roman Catholicism. In 1517, a large group of Franciscans arrived in Goa and, shortly after their arrival, they baptised 800 Hindus in the name of Christ; an entire Indian village converted to Christianity in 1524; and by 1539 conversions to Christianity had increased significantly, resulting in a number of villages with Christian churches or chapels.<sup>24</sup> In these earliest years of their colonial presence, the Portuguese methods of conversion were notably less aggressive than what was to come later—they first relied upon “taking over the care of orphans and using a system of privileges to attract adherents to the faith.”<sup>25</sup> It was only around 1540, Rowena Robinson notes, that these Portuguese Catholics sought to eradicate Hindu culture and Hindu socioreligious existence through launching a campaign against Hindu images, destroying Hindu temples, and banning Hindus (particularly the higher-caste *gauncars*—that is, rulers who claimed to be the original inhabitants of the villages—and the priests) from performing religious rites.<sup>26</sup> Expanding upon Robinson's scholarship, Henn has compiled, in substantial detail, the many effective yet subtle ways in which Catholic authorities went about with their

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<sup>23</sup> Robinson notes that, while there were certainly Muslims in the region when the Portuguese arrived, their presence was “seriously decimated by the Portuguese” and it was therefore predominantly Hindus whom the Portuguese sought to convert. Robinson, “Sixteenth Century Conversions to Christianity in Goa,” 292.

<sup>24</sup> Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)*, I:443.

<sup>25</sup> Robinson, “Sixteenth Century Conversions to Christianity in Goa,” 303.

<sup>26</sup> Robinson, 305.

“ferocious iconoclastic campaign against Hindu culture in India.”<sup>27</sup> In the 1540s, evangelisation efforts in Goa were augmented by official initiatives such as the Portuguese government’s offer to give benefits to missionaries who were able to secure a certain number of Hindu converts to Christianity.<sup>28</sup> At the same time that some conversion efforts were becoming more targeted and forceful, in 1543 the Jesuits established a seminary in Goa in which approximately six hundred male students were taught reading, writing, grammar, and catechism.<sup>29</sup> This establishment was possibly a reflection of the Jesuit critique of other European priests who were said to have baptised converts without properly ensuring that they had first received proper catechetical instruction in the ways of the church.<sup>30</sup>

However, no number of Jesuit seminaries and educational efforts could counteract the fact that the Portuguese were already gaining a widespread reputation for fiercely imposing their viewpoints of orthodox Christian belief and practices on the Hindu social forms which they encountered. Contextualising the eventual use by the Portuguese of more persistent and forceful tactics, Henn provides an overview of the specific ways in which early-modern Christians often violently enforced their religious viewpoints in various cultural contexts in Asia; notable in this regard are the Roman Catholic Church’s official stance which banned all forms of *accomodatio* (literally “accommodating” or tolerating indigenous forms of Christianity) and, in particular, the authoritative doctrinal statements of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which put forth several mandates which explicitly targeted those who were deemed by the Council to have too much overlap with non-Christian forms of religiosity.<sup>31</sup>

It is important for our discussion here to explicitly note that many of the Portuguese Catholics’ corrective actions concerning religious beliefs and practices were not focused exclusively on individuals without long-standing commitments to Christian communities (including Hindus outside of Christianity<sup>32</sup> along with those Hindus who had recently converted to Christianity<sup>33</sup>), rather they were additionally focused specifically on the Syrian Christians. An intense scrutiny of religious beliefs and practices, and subsequent attempts at regulation, were carried out by the Portuguese Catholics when interacting with Syrian Christians from the

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<sup>27</sup> Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)*, I:475.

<sup>29</sup> O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 203.

<sup>30</sup> O’Malley, 78.

<sup>31</sup> Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*, 47; Badrinath, *Finding Jesus in Dharma*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Robinson, “Sixteenth Century Conversions to Christianity in Goa,” 305.

<sup>33</sup> Robinson, 313.

16<sup>th</sup> century onward. Through the regulations stipulated at the Synod of Diamper (a diocesan council convened by the Latin rite Catholic Archbishop of Goa in 1599), the Portuguese exerted direct power over Syrian Christians during their age of sociopolitical influence in Goa. The social and religious effects of these regulations are noted by L.W. Brown in his detailed historical narrative, which documents the many ways in which the Portuguese tried to implement their normative understanding of orthodox Christian belief and practice within Syrian Christian contexts—which entailed, first and foremost, adhering to the teachings of the Pope.<sup>34</sup> The Portuguese were quite meticulous and thorough with regard to stipulating the precise ways to believe in, and follow, the one true Christian God; and they wanted to correct (more precisely, to eliminate) the broadly Hindu spiritual notions such as *karma*, *dharma*, and others that the Syrian Christians had incorporated into their own Christian practices.<sup>35</sup> To this end, the Portuguese demanded of the Syrian Christians that they present all their spiritual books to the Portuguese for correction. They sought to remove all influences and traces of the wider milieus of Hinduism from these texts, and if they could not be emended, the texts were destroyed.<sup>36</sup> During the Inquisition in Goa (which was established in 1560 and which lasted until 1623) approximately “3,800 cases were tried by the Holy Office in Goa, or almost exactly sixty in a year.”<sup>37</sup> The precise details of the Inquisition (specifically how many individuals were executed and/or died in imprisonment) are not known, since all records have been destroyed.<sup>38</sup> While, as Robinson has demonstrated, it is impossible to fully disentangle the *political* and *religious* threads with regard to the Portuguese motivations for, and methods of, conversion,<sup>39</sup> it is undeniable that the Portuguese authoritarian presence involved a thorough and powerful governing of the religious beliefs and actions of Indians—Hindu and Christian alike.

Widespread discontent with such Portuguese attempts to regulate and govern their own activities and beliefs led many leaders within Syrian Christian communities to take a famous oath in 1653 (the Coonan Cross Oath), vowing to no longer show ecclesiastical obedience to the Pope, to expel all the Portuguese Jesuits from their communities, and to follow bishops only from an Eastern Orthodox church.<sup>40</sup> Around 25,000 Syrian Christians are estimated to

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<sup>34</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, 35; Abraham, “Negotiating Hinduism and Christianity in the History of Kerala.”

<sup>37</sup> Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*, 230.

<sup>38</sup> Neill, 230.

<sup>39</sup> Robinson, “Sixteenth Century Conversions to Christianity in Goa,” 309.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*.

have taken this oath.<sup>41</sup> This refusal to follow the Roman Catholic Church culminated in a meeting between the Portuguese and the Syrian Christian communities on 23 September 1657 where the two parties discussed the extent to which they felt that Roman Catholic archbishops should be obeyed or have any spiritual authority over the Syrian Christian communities. Consequently, the Portuguese intensified their efforts to bring the Syrian Christian communities into obedience to Rome, and on 22 August 1661 Bishop Joseph succeeded in bringing 84 parishes back to communion with Rome—though 32 parishes remained without formal obedience to the Pope.<sup>42</sup> Despite the fact that Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) (an Italian Jesuit, whose allegiance—like the Portuguese—was also to Roman religious authorities, and whom we shall return to below) was advocating, around this time, the acceptance and incorporation of Hindu cultural expressions into his Christian beliefs, practices, and preaching, the Portuguese generally rejected these displays of tolerance, and consistently attempted to rectify the practices of the Syrian Orthodox communities and to bring them into line with what they deemed to be orthodox.<sup>43</sup>

### 2.2.3. *The British Raj*

When the Dutch took over Cochin in 1663, they ordered all other foreign (especially Portuguese) priests and monks to leave the country.<sup>44</sup> However, the period during which the Dutch maintained their power within India is not well-documented and the existing sources make it very difficult for historians to gain an understanding of what actually happened.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, we move on to the more extensively recorded and studied interactions between Britons and Indians, roughly between 1800 and 1947, which were also decisive in producing and entrenching a widespread perception that Christianity is a religion of foreigners. The initial split between “our” Christianity and “their” Christianity that had opened up in the course of the Portuguese efforts to cast local Indian practices into moulds of Catholic orthodoxy only widened, as we will see, in some of these Indo-British exchanges.

Active proselytization was not an initial feature of British interactions with Indians; most British individuals living in India in the 18<sup>th</sup> century refrained from making any explicit corrections of the doctrines and practices they observed within Syrian Christian communities,

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<sup>41</sup> Abraham, “Negotiating Hinduism and Christianity in the History of Kerala.”

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*, 104–7.

<sup>43</sup> Mathew and Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*, 29–33.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*, 107.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, 130.

and they instead focused their attention on more implicit styles. However, this stance of tolerance began to shift around 1813, when the original East India Company's charter (issued by Queen Elizabeth I on 31 December 1600) was revisited and reworked: a clause was added which stated that provisions should be made to help people wishing to go to India for the "religious and moral improvement" of the Indians. Even though any explicit reference to missionaries was avoided<sup>46</sup>, we can note a clear shift in what was deemed to be an acceptable way of interacting with the religious practices of Indians—these were deemed to require moral "improvement." Though this wording was an implicit, rather than an explicit, acceptance of missionaries who would be engaged in active proselytization, it was still originally greeted with hostility by British administrators such as Thomas Grenville who declared, "We are conquerors in India, and I do not like to see a regiment of missionaries acting under and with the authority of unrestricted power."<sup>47</sup> Such administrators tended to view missionaries as troublesome meddlers who disturbed the local peace and generated social unrest. Even after missionaries became a more visible presence on the sociocultural landscapes of British India, some British missionaries consciously maintained a distinction between active proselytization and other social reformist activities which were focused on improving the everyday livelihoods of Indians. For example, Barbara Ramusack explores the social activism of five British women who lived in India from 1865-1945. While Ramusack describes these women as "cultural missionaries" who often sought to promote Western-European cultural ideas concerning subjectivities like female modesty in the course of enacting their primary goal of educating Indian girls and women, she emphasises that even those women who held strong Christian convictions consciously refrained from proselytization in order to secure and maintain their position as trusted educators.<sup>48</sup>

Notwithstanding the somewhat lukewarm attitude of the British Government in India towards the active proselytization of the Indians, the rise of British Christian missionary organisations at home corresponded broadly with an intensification of the evangelical attitudes of some Protestant groups in England during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup> An early figure in this

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<sup>46</sup> Arthur Mayhew writes: "When the time came for remodeling the charter accordingly, there was no longer any talk of Government patronage and maintenance. There was not even any explicit reference to missionaries as apart from other philanthropists."

<sup>47</sup> Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India*, 271.

<sup>48</sup> Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945."

<sup>49</sup> Hindmarsh, *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism*; Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening*; Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*.

connection was the English missionary called Thomas Norton from the Society of Asia who arrived in India in 1816.<sup>50</sup> Norton and his British contemporaries (especially important was Thomas Munro, Governor of Madras) were very interested in, and no doubt pleased by, the presence of the Syrian Christians, since the existence of such a long-standing Indian Christian community seemed to prove that Christianity could flourish, and sustain itself, within Indian environments. While the Portuguese had utilised fairly overt forms of correction with regard to the doctrines and the practices of the Syrian Christian communities, Norton and Munro professed that they did not want to directly change the conceptual and experiential forms of Syrian Christianity. They were, in fact, quite interested in preserving the language and the liturgical tradition of the Syrian Christians, and they only sought to strengthen the governance structure of the Syrian Church. In order to ensure that they had the power to authoritatively guide and overrule any decisions made by the Syrian Christian leadership, Norton and Munro strategically placed themselves at the top of the structure; the Syrian Christians were, however, allowed to keep the public seats of power.<sup>51</sup>

Towards the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some British missionaries began to develop stronger measures to explicitly correct the various aspects of Syrian Christianity that they regarded as spiritually erroneous. Brown offers the example of Joseph Peet, an Anglican priest, who between 1833-1835 vocally opposed the ways that Syrian Christians in Kerala observed rules of religious purity. Peet not only preached against their observance of such purity laws in socioreligious contexts, but also deliberately attempted to defile their purity by touching them after they had completed their ritual washing in preparation for a religious feast. Commenting on Peet's public efforts to stridently eradicate aspects of Indian Christian practices that did not align with Anglican Christian cultural norms, Brown writes that "there were many such incidents and while they may be deplored as discourteous and unwise it has to be recognised that the missionaries had become convinced that silence on their part would be, in fact, a denial of fundamental Christian truth."<sup>52</sup>

Christian convictions similar to those of Peet can be seen around the same time in places like Bengal, where some British individuals consciously steered away from an appreciation of Indian languages, customs, and philosophical traditions which had been more common around 1780-1800, and instead dismissed them as primitive, heathenish, and corrupt. Some others

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<sup>50</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*, 132.

<sup>51</sup> Brown, 134–38.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, 138.

actively sought to alter Indian customs through administrative interventions.<sup>53</sup> From roughly the 1830s onwards, a number of British administrators and policy-makers, along with the British Baptist missionaries who lived in Serampore, Bengal (Julius Lipner names William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward as the “British Baptist trio”), played a pivotal role in promoting English education for Bengalis which, Lipner explains, included “not only the teaching of English but also the infusion of western ideas along English lines.”<sup>54</sup> Thomas Macaulay’s now infamous “Minute on Education,” written in 1835, illustrates the ways in which some administrators believed that they should Anglicise Indians not only for the presumed benefits that would accrue to the Indians themselves, but also for the strategic goals of the British colonists who could employ the Western-educated Indians as interpreters. Macaulay notoriously articulated his disdain for Indian literature and culture by succinctly declaring that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”<sup>55</sup>

This contempt for Indian culture and heritage in the 1830s was a remarkable shift from the effervescent “Indomania” that had flowed through some British circles roughly five decades earlier, when some civil servants who had arrived in Calcutta around 1780 had developed Orientalist scholarship which J.J. Clarke describes as being extremely influential with regard to the British gaining a deep understanding of, and also a sensitive appreciation for, Indian customs and traditions.<sup>56</sup> R. Schwab has referred to this intense production of knowledges of the Orient as “the decisive period in Indic studies.”<sup>57</sup> Around this time, in 1785, the British Governor General Warren Hastings unhesitatingly declared the *Bhagavad Gita* to be “a performance of great originality, of a sublimity of conception, reasoning and diction, almost unequalled; and a single exception, among all the known religions of mankind, of a theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation, and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines.”<sup>58</sup>

We must therefore ask: what are the structural explanations which could account for this somewhat dramatic shift from a seemingly genuine admiration for, and even tolerance of, Indian (and specifically Hindu) texts and traditions, to an intense “Indophobia” where a number

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<sup>53</sup> Bearce, *British Attitudes Towards India, 1784-1858*.

<sup>54</sup> Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Stein, *A History of India*, 265.

<sup>56</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, 33.

<sup>58</sup> As quoted in Keay, *India Discovered*, 25. From Governor General Warren Hastings’s “Letter in Preface to Charles Wilkins’s translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*” in 1785

of British colonial administrators actively sought to overturn the prevalence of Hindu traditions within Indian societies? Peter van der Veer has suggested that these earlier appreciative attitudes of British colonial officials, who had valued Indian knowledges, languages, philosophy, and so on, were replaced by an imperial desire to rule and administer India. As the British Self—posited as rational, progressive, and spiritual—began to carefully distance itself from its Indian Other—now projected by the British as irrational, reactionary, and heathenish—it aimed at actively uplifting Indians through education. In this context, drawing upon the Saidian scholarship of Gauri Viswanathan, van der Veer argues that education became “religion’s primary instrument for conversion and expansion” during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>59</sup> While van der Veer concentrates his study primarily on South India, we see a similar development in Bengal around the same time: Baptist missionaries—even those who learned, and published in, Bengali—equally sought to utilise their roles as educators to convey Western values and forms of Christianity and, ultimately, to supplant existing Hindu ones during the first three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lipner makes it clear that such missionaries “deplored Hinduism and its cultural expressions. They subscribed to the view that contemporary Hinduism was socially, morally and theologically irredeemable.”<sup>60</sup> Some British officials also consistently sought to remove Hindu traditions and practices from public spheres in India. There were several strong displays of “anti-Hindu rhetoric” which took the form of public protests by Christian Evangelicals in Britain who, starting from around 1817, demanded that the British government in India cease its support of Hindu institutions.<sup>61</sup> For instance, Lord Bentinck (Governor General of India, 1828-1835) used his political influence to develop several policies which propelled the governing structure towards the conscious modernization of Indian societies.<sup>62</sup> And, as Richard King (grounding his own argument in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*) has so clearly articulated, modernisation and Westernisation cannot be neatly separated from each other because “‘modernity’ is intrinsically bound up with the European Enlightenment project. Thus, despite the claimed cultural and political neutrality of the language of ‘modernization’ ... [the Orientalists’] methods, goals and underlying values presupposed the supremacy of European culture.” This Eurocentric framework remained operative, King argues, even when European missionaries “appeared to be promoting the

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<sup>59</sup> van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, 6–7.

<sup>60</sup> Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Bearce, *British Attitudes Towards India, 1784-1858*.



vernacular and the indigenous.”<sup>63</sup> We can apply this Eurocentric dismissal of all things culturally-Indian not only to some British officials’ treatment of Hindus but also of those Indian Christians who seemed to remain too closely tied to Hindu cultural idioms.

In these various ways, we see that—in the case of both Portuguese and British colonial rules—foreign powers frequently deemed various expressions of Indian Christianity to be doctrinally incorrect—indeed, to be *too Indian*—and thus sought to correct them by aligning them more closely with European Christianity. We discussed the ways in which both the Portuguese and the British often endeavoured to establish themselves as the corrective authority which would domesticate the otherness of the Syrian Christian communities and, more generally, to replace Hindu-inflected beliefs and practices with ones that were more congruent with the respective European Christianities that they held as doctrinally normative. Often, this normalisation through colonial power resulted in strategically banning and intentionally eliminating the forms of knowledge which were deemed to be too closely linked to Hinduism. The cumulative result of these interactions is that Christianity gradually gained a reputation in various Indian circles as being associated both with foreign colonial powers and with Western cultures.

### 2.3. EXPRESSIONS OF INCULTURATED CHRISTIANITY BEFORE STA (PRE-1930)

It is against this backdrop of perceptions, representations, and images of foreignness that expressions of inculturated Christianity began to emerge from around the turn of the twentieth century. Accordingly, this section moves the focus away from the ways that the Portuguese and the British interacted with various indigenous expressions of Christianity and instead studies specific individuals and institutions enacting and embodying forms of Indianised or inculturated Christianity. Contrary to the passionate statements made by some of Jones’s friends and family members who describe him as a great pioneer of inculturation and the founder of Christian ashrams in a more general sense, Jones was not by any means the first to conceptualise and inspire the practices of Christians who sought to live out their faith in cultural forms that would be familiar to (Brahmanical) Hindus. In this exploration of figures of inculturation before Jones, I have included Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), who came to India from Europe as a missionary, but I consciously limit my discussion of foreign missionaries to him: he is a notable forerunner of indigenisation and earns a place in this necessarily brief overview. American missionaries such as John Newton Foreman, Morley Hartley, and Samuel

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<sup>63</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 87–88.

(Satyananda<sup>64</sup>) Stokes, among others, who desired to indigenise Christianity in India are explored in further detail elsewhere.<sup>65</sup> Following my sketch of de Nobili, I focus on two paradigmatic Indians: Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) and Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922). Both of them are also notable forerunners to Jones in imagining, forging, and enacting lifestyles that were both doctrinally Christian and culturally Indian; Upadhyay is often recognised as the quintessential Indian figure of indigenisation, while Ramabai holds a special place in the context of STA since she is recognised there as a model of Indian Christianity. Sadhu Sundar Singh<sup>66</sup> is another well-known figure of inculturation<sup>67</sup>, and Paul Collins also draws our attention to three Christian priests—Thomas Palackal, Thomas Porukara, and Kuriakos Elias—all of whom began to live as ascetics (*sannyasis*) in 1831.<sup>68</sup> There were also some contemporaneous Indian (Protestant) Christian pioneers of inculturation such as A.J. Appasamy, V. Chakkarai, and P. Chenchiah who were developing Indianised theologies of Christ.<sup>69</sup> In addition to the lives of de Nobili, Upadhyay, and Ramabai, there are also several examples of Christian ashrams that predate the establishment of STA in 1930, and I indicate these below.

In highlighting the many charismatic individuals and institutional efforts which were precursors, with their distinctive missiological methods, of Jones's efforts at inculturation, I do not, however, mean to undermine or belittle the transformative effects that his visions and efforts had on Indianising the Christian message. To the contrary, I seek to indicate that he contributed significantly to the extensive narratives of indigenisation generated by some Christians who had gone before him, and who probably also inspired him at some level. In doing so, he played a crucial role in developing the motifs and the processes of inculturation already in the pre-Vatican II era. Furthermore, most crucially, as Jones actively sought to create a Christian community which was “both truly Christian and truly Indian” he operated within the socio-cultural contexts created by these forerunners. Importantly, as Chapter 3 shall

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<sup>64</sup> Samuel Stokes changed his name to Satyananda Stokes after he had converted to Hinduism in 1931. His conversion (which came after many years of Stokes advocating that foreign missionaries must embrace an indigenised Christianity) was pointed to by some more conservative evangelicals as an example of the dangers of embracing indigenisation. As Susan Khan highlights, the phrase “doing a Stokes” was later adopted among missionaries to describe the precarious slippery slope of inculturation. Haskell Khan, “The India Mission Field in American History, 1919-1947,” 58.

<sup>65</sup> Haskell Khan, 27–28; 34–36; 51–58.

<sup>66</sup> Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929) is also recognised by Jones and STA as a model of Indian Christianity (a letter from him, addressed to Jones in 1927, is proudly displayed in STA's library.) For Singh's own writings, see Moore's edited collection *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Essential Writings* (2005).

<sup>67</sup> Dobe, *Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood*.

<sup>68</sup> Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India*, 78.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas, “Indian Christian Approaches to the Knowledge of Christ.”

demonstrate, many of Jones's views relating to what it meant to be "truly Indian" while being "truly Christian" echoed the sentiments expressed by these pioneers of inculturation before him. The extent to which Jones consciously inherited their discourses is not known, but, I speculate, the Indian Christian communities and the Hindu societies at large with which Jones interacted would have been informed and shaped by these earlier practices of inculturation. We now turn to some of these individuals who creatively wove together the fabrics of Christian beliefs and practices with Indian cultural expressions.

### 2.3.1. *Roberto de Nobili*

When Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) arrived in South India in 1605, he noted that in nearly eleven years of missionary work, his predecessor Father Fernandes "had not been able to win to the faith a single high-caste Hindu."<sup>70</sup> As time went on, de Nobili gradually learned that many aspects of their lifestyles that the Portuguese Christians enacted without much thought or consideration—wearing leather, eating meat, drinking alcohol, etc.—were in fact perceived as abominable by high-caste Hindus. This ritualised distaste was not something that Fernandes had ever registered, because he had conceptualised Europeans (especially the Portuguese) as occupying the superior social position with regard to Indians, and he further believed that Christianity was superior to Hindu Brahmanism.<sup>71</sup> Deeply desiring to welcome high-caste Hindus into the folds of the Roman Catholic faith, however, de Nobili began an experiment in indigenisation: could he adopt a way of life that was acceptable to his high-caste Hindu neighbours, in order to rid them of the prejudices they had developed of Christians? This experiment would involve, among other things, ceasing to interact with Indians from the lower castes in order to maintain his ritual purity in the eyes of the Brahmins. De Nobili also became conversant in some Indian languages (Sanskrit and Tamil), wore the orange robes of a Hindu ascetic, and wrote vigorously about the merits of Indian culture and "the legitimacy of treating it with the same respect afforded to the cultures of ancient Rome and Greece."<sup>72</sup> Each of these styles of accommodations—though they were met with varying degrees of success—are early examples of a Christian priest intentionally adopting elements from Indian (specifically, Brahmanical Hindu) cultures in order to be seen as more acceptable and inviting to high-caste Hindus. Even though, as Francis Clooney has pointed out, de Nobili's earliest writings show

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<sup>70</sup> Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*, 280.

<sup>71</sup> Neill, 280.

<sup>72</sup> Clooney, *The Future of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 24.

that he was lacking “in sympathy for the traditions under consideration and [was] evidently unable to read sympathetically the practices of another tradition”<sup>73</sup>, his interest in, and willingness to, embrace and enact certain idioms of Hindu culture in order to be more effectively at preaching the Christian gospel is a notable early example of inculturation.

### 2.3.2. *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*

We now turn to Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) whom Lipner has described as having made a “pioneering attempt to Indianize Christianity”<sup>74</sup> and who is often depicted as an exemplary model of indigenised Christianity. Upadhyay was born in Calcutta (Kolkata) and sought to live out the ideals of an ascetic.<sup>75</sup> Upon converting to Catholicism, he continued to identify as a Hindu because he understood Hindu *dharmic* teachings to be fully compatible with Catholic doctrine. Importantly, Upadhyay was attracted to certain Catholic doctrines more than to the institutionalised hierarchies of Catholic communities—he argued that, while Catholic teachings were inspired by God, they had been warped by the inherited ecclesiastical traditions of the Catholic Church.<sup>76</sup> Upadhyay therefore wished to take the teachings of Catholicism and dress them in “Hindu garments,” and his primary allegiance remained to Catholic teachings about Christ, rather than to the institutional structures of the Catholic Church.<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, Lipner argues that Upadhyay did *not* simply seek to “implant Christian concepts in Vedantic soil” and suggests that Upadhyay instead sought to construct “more or less exact correspondences between Vedantic ideas and Thomistic ones so that Vedanta in some respects may be seen as a form of crypto-(neo-)Thomism and Shankara as St Thomas in disguise. This is a mode of transplantation, not of implantation...”<sup>78</sup>. Lipner elaborates upon how Upadhyay sought “to show that the *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda* of classical Vedanta as a description of ultimate reality corresponded more or less exactly to the understanding of the nature of God of Catholic *natural* [sic] theology, that is, neo-Thomistic reasoning about the essence of the divine being.”<sup>79</sup> According to Lipner’s reading of Upadhyay, then, any discussion of Upadhyay in the contexts of inculturation should be shaped by the understanding

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<sup>73</sup> Clooney, 25–26.

<sup>74</sup> Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, xv.

<sup>75</sup> Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India*, 78.

<sup>76</sup> Duerksen and Dyrness, *Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context*, 3–10.

<sup>77</sup> Badrinath, *Finding Jesus in Dharma*, 104.

<sup>78</sup> Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, 188.

<sup>79</sup> Lipner, 191.

that Upadhyay himself might have resisted a notion that is implicit in some definitions of inculturation—that one religion (Christianity, in this case) could be shifted to a different culture beyond its European epicentre, and, with time, would take on certain new attributes and aspects in that new culture. In contrast to the claim that European Christianity was being transplanted *into* Indic soils, Upadhyay—at least at certain points in his own journey which are recorded in his writings—viewed Vedanta as a veiled form of Thomism and thus already containing Catholic truth. In other words, some quintessence of Christianity, no matter how obscured, had always been present in India; any expression of Christianity which was enclothed with distinctively Indic cultural idioms was therefore not altogether new.

Of course, Upadhyay was theologising in a context before Said and other postcolonial scholars from the 1970s and 1980s, whose sound critiques of the power dynamics with which Orientalism operates forced subsequent scholarship to reconsider any assertions that two distinctive religions are, more or less, the same (or at least challenged the tendency of making such identity-claims too hastily). This historical location places Upadhyay in a rather different camp than present-day comparative theologians like Francis Clooney<sup>80</sup>, Michelle Voss Roberts<sup>81</sup>, and others who so beautifully look to two distinct traditions with the hope that one will shed light on the other while maintaining and preserving the distinctive features of both traditions. It should also be noted that Upadhyay was not focused on the generalised categories of *Christianity* and *Hinduism* but, more specifically, on *Roman Catholicism* and *Advaita Vedanta*, and his terminologies frequently reflect this relatively narrow focus.

All this to say that Upadhyay's passionate interest in both Roman Catholicism and Advaita led him to live a lifestyle which embraced a hybrid combination of both Christian and Hindu teachings and practices—he actively sought to combat the notion that Christianity was exclusively a religion of foreigners and was necessarily packaged with the trappings of European cultures. Upadhyay's rejection of the foreignness of Christianity is further seen, quite unambiguously, in his plea that Christian preachers consciously refrain from doing anything that might further reinforce the perception that Christianity was a religion of foreigners and a destroyer of the Indian cultures. Along these lines, in 1894 Upadhyay wrote that “the itinerant missionaries should be thoroughly Hindu in their mode of living. They should, if necessary, be strict vegetarians and teetotalers and put on the yellow *sannyasi* garb...The missionaries should be well-versed in Sanskrit, for one ignorant of Sanskrit will hardly be able to vanquish Hindu

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<sup>80</sup> Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence*.

<sup>81</sup> Voss Roberts, *Tastes of the Divine*.

preachers.”<sup>82</sup> And, a few years later, Upadhyay wrote that the Catholic Church must find a way to “make Hindu philosophy hew wood and draw water for her,” by which he implied that Hindu philosophies would offer conceptual tools which Christianity needed in order to flourish in Indian contexts.<sup>83</sup> Reiterating this conviction, Upadhyay wrote in 1898 that “it is the *sannyasi* alone who is capable of presenting to our countrymen the mysteries of the Catholic faith.”<sup>84</sup> As much as Upadhyay felt that the habit of the *sannyasi* should be worn by Catholic missionaries who wished to communicate their faith, he also advocated for a metaphorical “dressing” in which Catholicism is consciously “donned” not in “European garb” and “alien dress” (which, Upadhyay asserts, “repels [his Indian] countrymen”) but in a “Hindu garment” in order to be “acceptable to the Hindus.” That is, the missionaries should present a Catholicism that is deeply imbued with the cultural idioms that would resonate with (Vedantic) Hindu experiences.<sup>85</sup>

### 2.3.3. *Pandita Ramabai*

Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), whose photographed portrait hangs in one of the main rooms of STA, is embraced and eulogised there as a figure who did not abandon her Indian cultural identity while embracing the salvific doctrine of Christianity in which Jesus Christ is regarded as the unique means of spiritual transformation, salvation, and redemption.<sup>86</sup> Because of the ways she is revered within the spaces of STA as well as is championed more widely as an exemplar of inculturation and also as a notable Indian Christian woman, her religious narrative merits some discussion.

Ramabai grew up in a Brahmin family where she was exposed to very traditional forms of Hinduism. Her father was well-versed in Sanskrit and Ramabai learned to read Sanskrit at a young age. Not fully satisfied with the forms of Hinduism she had been exposed to through her childhood upbringing, Ramabai later sought out the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta before being exposed to Christianity there. The Christianity she encountered initially seemed utterly foreign to her, and she struggled to understand how Indians could embrace such a distant religion. In spite of this distaste, she was deeply drawn to the very active engagement of some Christians with social justice projects and especially their caring for widows and orphans. When Ramabai began to notice the everyday forms of suffering around her, she simultaneously

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<sup>82</sup> Lipner and Gispert-Sauch, *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, II:177.

<sup>83</sup> Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials*, 268.

<sup>84</sup> Lipner and Gispert-Sauch, *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, II:202.

<sup>85</sup> Lipner and Gispert-Sauch, II:206–7.

<sup>86</sup> Shah, *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*.

observed that Christians seemed to show more mercy to the sufferers than did her fellow-Hindus; indeed, Ramabai concluded that Christianity as a religious system responded more humanely to suffering than did Hinduism.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, Ramabai began to understand Jesus to be someone who broke through social barriers and crossed cultural boundaries in order to serve people with goodness and kindness; she was particularly struck by stories within the Christian scriptures in which Jesus shows a desire to help those who had sinned, and moves beyond his society's boundaries in order to conduct acts of service towards those who were less fortunate. This sort of context-specific and scripturally rooted understanding of God's restoration of people who have been hurt, oppressed, marginalised, or mistreated through their social systems would later become a prominent feature of Dalit theology, as we will see in Chapter 4.<sup>88</sup> In 1883, Ramabai set sail for England and was introduced to the work of the Sisters of the Community of St Mary the Virgin among the sick and infirm women in London. Prompted to thus reflect on the condition of such women in Hindu society, and in the light of her reading of John's Gospel, she became convinced that Christ was the Saviour who could "transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India and of every land."<sup>89</sup> Inspired by such Christian teachings, Ramabai soon opened a girl's home (the *Sharada Sadan* or "Home of Learning") for the education of young child widows who were of Brahmanical parentage and for other high caste women.<sup>90</sup> The *Sharada Sadan* was a testament to the great value that Ramabai placed on education, but it can furthermore be considered in order to better understand Ramabai's own navigation of Hindu and Christian identities.

As her exposure to Christianity developed, and as her Christology became more nuanced, she began to identify as a Christian but vowed to keep the Brahmanical purity laws in her school and to not officially teach any Christian doctrine. This assurance to the girls' parents that her school would remain an environment where the Hindu students would also continue to observe their religious purity was crucial for its success. Ramabai's respect for Brahmanical purity laws can be understood as an expression of her respect, more broadly, for India's many religious traditions; her admiration and reverence for non-Christian traditions is expressed in her 1883 essay "Indian Religion" in which she applauds some missionaries for their willingness to learn from "the sacred writings of India...which God has given to us in

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<sup>87</sup> Schouten, *Jesus as Guru*, 67.

<sup>88</sup> Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, 295–324. Reprinted in Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai*, 307–8.

<sup>90</sup> Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai*, 10–11.

past ages,” and she further asserts that this willingness to draw upon ancient Indian sacred texts will “help my countrymen to see more of the divine truth...”<sup>91</sup> A year later in 1884, arguing that the inscription of a cross that was to be displayed on the premises of the mission in Poona should be in Sanskrit and not in Latin, she wrote: “Do you think that [the] Latin language has something better in it than our old Sanskrit ...? I stick fast to Sanskrit, not because I think it to be sacred or the language of the gods, but because it is the most beautiful, and the oldest language of my dear native land.”<sup>92</sup>

During the early years of managing the *Sharada Sadan*, Ramabai herself continued to observe Brahmanical purity laws, and she went to great lengths to defend what she saw as the good and noble aspects of Hindu philosophy and practice.<sup>93</sup> Yet, at the same time, Ramabai claimed that she could not resist her urge to openly express her Christian faith, which she described as the spiritual force which had completely transformed her life. Accordingly, she found various ways to incorporate her Christian faith into the forefront of the school’s activities: every day she led her own daughter in Bible study, and over time some other girls slowly joined the discussion. Many of the Brahmins with whom she had previously maintained affiliations began to publicly voice their dislike for Ramabai’s clear avowals of Christianity, and around 1891 many of the guardians who had entrusted their young girls to Ramabai’s school promptly withdrew their wards due to allegations of proselytization.<sup>94</sup> It is likely that their refusal to accept her active embracing of some aspects of Christian faith, combined with the strident rejection of other Brahmins who disapproved of her Christian affiliation, led to Ramabai’s own subsequent rejection of Brahmanical rituals and philosophies. Ramabai became particularly focused on the theology of the atonement in her later years, and scholars in the field of Indian Pentecostalism generally attribute the spread of Pentecostal Christianity to the Mukti revival in Maharashtra, which Ramabai fervently led.<sup>95</sup> And yet, as Ramabai eventually came to view her Christian faith as a progressively stronger transformative force within her own life, she grew increasingly distant from, and even hostile towards, her Hindu socioreligious background. Eventually, Ramabai reached a point where she derogatorily referred to Brahmins as “heathens” who were in need of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ if they wished to be made right with God—despite the fact that she had actively resisted such

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<sup>91</sup> Kosambi, 120.

<sup>92</sup> Shah, *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, 27–28.

<sup>93</sup> Schouten, *Jesus as Guru*, 74–76.

<sup>94</sup> Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai*, 11.

<sup>95</sup> Kuhlin, “Hindu-Christian Relations,” 41.



views in her earlier years as a Christian. As Jan Peter Schouten points out, these developments in her later years as a Christian rendered the prospect of dialoguing with Hindus impossible.<sup>96</sup>

#### 2.3.4. *Institutional expressions of Indianised Christianity*

Not only were there various individuals who acted as the forerunners of enacting an Indianised Christianity, but also there were several institutional efforts during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which sought to infuse Christianity with Indian cultural idioms.<sup>97</sup> We know that there were discussions relating to Christian ashrams in Protestant contexts in 1910 which were initiated by S.K. Rudra<sup>98</sup>, and also among other non-Catholics in April 1912 at a meeting of the National Missionary Society in Delhi<sup>99</sup>—and there could have been earlier, undocumented instances. The earliest institution of a Protestant ashram was in 1917 in Satara by N.V. Tilak, but the ashram did not last very long due to Tilak's death only two years later.<sup>100</sup> The first Protestant ashram which lasted more than a few years, Christukula, was founded in 1921 in the town of Tiruppattur in Tamil Nadu, South India.<sup>101</sup> An even longer-lasting and better-known Protestant ashram, by the name of Christa Seva Sangha, was founded in 1922 by Jack C. Winslow<sup>102</sup>, and a few years later the Christu Dasa ashram was founded in 1929 by P. John Varghese in Palghat, Kerala.<sup>103</sup> These various Christian ashrams, and a number of others which were formed after 1930—including the numerous Catholic ashrams which began to emerge in the 1950s—have been documented and explored in great detail elsewhere.<sup>104</sup> For example, Cornille notes that there was an increase in the number of Catholic ashrams in the 1970s, and their interactions with one another were facilitated through an inter-ashram newsletter called Ashram Aikiya.<sup>105</sup>

Further, though the historical records are somewhat murky, scholars have speculated that around the 1920s the Catholic missionaries in North East India (around Assam, Nagaland,

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<sup>96</sup> Schouten, *Jesus as Guru*, 79.

<sup>97</sup> Ralston, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India*, 113–15.

<sup>98</sup> Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India*, 79.

<sup>99</sup> Taylor, “Christian Ashrams,” 283.

<sup>100</sup> Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India*, 79.

<sup>101</sup> Taylor, “Christian Ashrams,” 284.

<sup>102</sup> Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India*, 81.

<sup>103</sup> Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrishtha Bhakta Movement*, 95.

<sup>104</sup> Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians*; Taylor, “Christian Ashrams”; Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India*, 77–89; Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrishtha Bhakta Movement*, 94–103; Webb, “The Christa Seva Sangh Ashram. 1922–1934.”

<sup>105</sup> Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism*, 125.

and various hill stations in the Khasi-Jaintia hills) began to develop a “greater sensitivity” to the tribal cultures with whom they interacted, thereby accounting for an increased number of conversions when compared to earlier Protestant practices which had been less driven by inculturation.<sup>106</sup> Other scholars have explored the various ways that inculturation was cultivated through the merging of Western and Indian musical traditions—in terms of both lyrical content and musical structure—and subsequently used in Christian contexts.<sup>107</sup> All these styles demonstrate that, in the decades leading up to the establishment of STA in 1930, there were available on the ground various examples of Christianity which had sought to incorporate Indian cultural idioms into its beliefs and practices.

More recently, some scholars have also pointed to the fact that from the 1950s onward many efforts of inculturation involved conceptualising Jesus as the true guru. For example, Cornille points to an excerpt from Henri le Saux’s diaries from 1955 to indicate how he came to view Christ as his Hindu guru. Le Saux writes, “The Christ whom I have first known and loved in his historical life in Jesus and later in his epiphany in the Church, has appeared to me at the end of time (of my time) in Bhagavan Sri Ramana.”<sup>108</sup> Cornille’s focus on the guru-disciple relationship as an avenue to exploring patterns of Christian inculturation has been developed by other scholars. For example, Christopher Shelke focuses on the devotional writings attributed to a number of different poet-saints, including the Maharashtrian mystic Ramdas (1608-81), and explores several guru-disciple relationships. In this discussion, Shelke draws a strong correlation between the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the notion of the true guru (*Satguru*).<sup>109</sup> Nearly two decades after Cornille’s volume, Schouten traces Christology in India over the last two centuries and provides a comprehensive survey of the prominent Indian-formed Christologies, thus demonstrating the varying and intricate ways through which some Indians have sought to understand and incorporate Jesus as a guru into their worldviews.<sup>110</sup> Schouten’s work is particularly relevant to our discussion because his study does not highlight Vatican II as the historical moment out of which inculturation originates. Rather, Schouten studies a number of individuals who pre-date Vatican II, and who have contributed to the dialogue between Hindus and Christians and/or to embodying inculturated Christianities in

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<sup>106</sup> Downs, *History of Christianity in India: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, V:106–7.

<sup>107</sup> Israel, “Protestant Devotion and the Development of the Tamil Hymn in Colonial South India,” 88.

<sup>108</sup> Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism*, 117.

<sup>109</sup> McGregor, *Devotional Literature in South Asia*.

<sup>110</sup> Schouten, *Jesus as Guru*.

India. Similar individuals are also the focal point of Bob Robinson's book *Christians Meeting Hindus*.<sup>111</sup>

### 2.3.5. *Inculturating a particular kind of Indianness*

These concretisations of Indianised and inculturated Christianity sought to show that Christianity could exist in India in a way that was not necessarily foreign. That is to say, expressions of Christianity should not be thought to be limited to Western archetypes or Westernised expressions. In doing so, their proponents combatted the earlier impressions of Christianity that had resulted from the colonial rules of Portugal and Britain. At the same time, these efforts to embody a type of Christianity that was distinctively Indian, rather than foreign, were rather single-mindedly focused on *one* particular kind of Indianness that was largely representative only of a relatively narrow strand of Hinduism. In order to understand the somewhat complicated and interlinked historical, social, and political currents of the 1920s and the 1930s, we also need to look more broadly beyond the sociohistorical narratives of Indian Christianities. Specifically, we must note that these decades witnessed the emergence and the consolidation of certain forms of hardline nationalist movements (later often clubbed together and referred to under the term "Hindutva.") There are a number of pivotal moments which punctuate the timeline in which socio-religious identities were being actively reconstituted and reconfigured: V.D. Savarkar's *Hindutva* tract was published and distributed in 1923; the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (later associated with the Sangh Parivar) was established in 1925; in 1928 there was a purification (*shuddhi*) ceremony in Goa in which a large number of Roman Catholics expressed their interest in returning to Hinduism, and so forth. Alongside these socio-political shifts, we also notice the increasing representation of Advaita Vedanta as the essence of Hindu spirituality by some prominent members of the Hindu intelligentsia, partly in response to Christian missionary critiques, throughout much of the nineteenth century, of Hindu life-worlds as idolatrous, superstitious, and heathenish.

The philosophical and the soteriological teachings of Advaita Vedanta had already been actively imported to some Western countries after Swami Vivekananda's addresses at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, and since then they had become increasingly well known in certain circles across the US, Canada, and Europe.<sup>112</sup> This increasing popularity post-1893 was not, however, the first time that Advaita Vedanta had become a topic of immense

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<sup>111</sup> Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus*.

<sup>112</sup> Advaita Vedanta was also transmitted to Western audiences by groups like the Theosophical Society.

interest for Western scholars; rather, a keen interest in Vedanta and, more generally, Hindu spirituality can be traced to period of European Romanticism, in which German scholars in particular displayed a great fascination with, and deep respect for, Vedantic philosophies. Influential scholars such as F.W.J. Schelling (1775-1854) “expressed great interest in and support for Indian and Oriental studies”; indeed, Schelling believed that India’s sacred texts were “superior” when compared to the Bible.<sup>113</sup> This affinity for India’s spiritual philosophies was asserted with even more conviction by Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) who wrote that “[e]verything, yes, everything has its origins in India”<sup>114</sup> and believed that India was “the primary source of all ideas.”<sup>115</sup> While these transnational translations of philosophy and spirituality that took place between India and Western countries cannot be explored in detail here, it is important to note that these intellectual influences from outside India contributed to establishing Advaita Vedanta as the quintessence of Hinduism. Several Hindu intellectuals, social reformers, and political figures began to present Advaitic spirituality as the quintessence of the religious traditions of the world, and as the “higher Hinduism” which was superior to the diverse cultic and “folk” practices within India. Indeed, R.D. Ranade delivered a series of lectures in Calcutta in 1929 on the topic of Vedanta in which he presented Vedanta as “the culmination of Indian thought.”<sup>116</sup> It was against this backdrop of a self-assertive Hinduism shaped with Vedantic elements that Indianised expressions of Christianity were gradually configured and enacted, and it is therefore not surprising that these expressions were heavily informed by Vedantic and Brahmanical vocabularies, norms, and ideas. Further, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter 3, these Brahmanical configurations resonated with what Jones deemed to be “the right way” of bringing the gospel to Hindus.

## 2.4. CONCLUSION

Few people would deny the assertion that “no human is an island” or that “no action occurs in a vacuum,” but at the same time, without the effort of excavation, we are rarely aware of the various social, historical, political, cultural, and other influences that shape our opinions, thoughts, and behaviours. Striving to achieve such awareness is important—not only because the individual’s perspectives are interesting and valuable in themselves, but also because self-awareness is the first step in enabling a critical self-reflexivity. When we become aware of not

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<sup>113</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Clarke, 64.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Clarke, 65.

<sup>116</sup> Ranade, *Vedanta: The Culmination of Indian Thought*.

only what we are doing—but also of the various external factors which influence us to think and act in the ways that we do—we increase our capacity to reflect upon these external influences on our actions and consequently to decide the extent to which we wish to pursue and engage with them. This effort of intentional self-awareness featured prominently in the previous chapter in our discussion of methodological bracketing and BIR, with respect to the generalised practices of anthropology as a discipline, but, more specifically relevant to our exploration of STA, this chapter, too, has offered just this sort of contextual excavation. Through exploring the activities of Portuguese Catholics and British Protestants in India during their respective countries’ colonial rules, we have seen the ways that Christianity gained a reputation within India as being a religion exclusively of foreigners. Through considering cases in which European individuals (both as ruling officers and as missionaries) interacted with Syrian Christian communities, we saw how both the Portuguese and the British often took measures to assert themselves as the corrective authority and, consequently, stamp their (Eurocentric) versions of Christianity as the normatively correct way of being Christian. At times this imperial stance resulted in the eradication of all religious practices and beliefs that were considered by them to be too closely linked to Hinduism, for only Western Christianity was deemed acceptable. Thus, as Sister Vandana, a Catholic nun who led the Christian ashram Jiva Dhara, and who wrote several books on the topic of inculturated Christianity, has recently highlighted: “the ‘foreignness’ of the Gospel presentation in Asia has long been a stumbling block” for individuals who might otherwise be interested in Christianity.<sup>117</sup>

Following the overview of the foreignness of Christianity, we looked at a number of examples of inculturation (by foreign missionaries, Indian Christians, and different institutional religious groups within India) which consciously incorporated various Indic cultural idioms into their expressions of Christianity, thereby embodying forms of Christianity which were deeply influenced by, and also accommodating of, Indian culture. Ranging from Roberto de Nobili, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, to Pandita Ramabai, and various institutionalised efforts, we see many examples of inculturated Christianity which pre-date 1930; importantly, these embodiments of Indianised Christianity were heavily influenced by, and inflected with, particularly Brahmanical strands of Hinduism. It is only in more recent years that many scholars have been challenged with the reality that Hinduism (let alone Indianness) is not limited to one particular style—works like Francis Clooney’s *Theology After Vedanta* (1993), for example, consciously avoid any attempt at a generalised dialogue between Vedanta and

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<sup>117</sup> Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians*, 54.

Christianity.<sup>118</sup> In the beginning and middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, this type of critical awareness had not yet permeated writers on Hinduism, and Indianness was often unequivocally associated with, or even identified, by a Brahmanical and/or Vedanta-inflected Hinduism. Keeping this historical trend in mind, our next chapter will explore in more detail the ways that E. Stanley Jones himself, and the development of STA in particular, were shaped by, and also contributed to, these Vedanta-inflected embodiments of Indianised Christianity.

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<sup>118</sup> Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta*.

## Chapter 3:

# THE ORIGINS OF SAT TAL CHRISTIAN ASHRAM AND E. STANLEY JONES'S "ASHRAM IDEALS"

### 3.1. DR. E. STANLEY JONES: THE FOUNDER OF SAT TAL CHRISTIAN ASHRAM

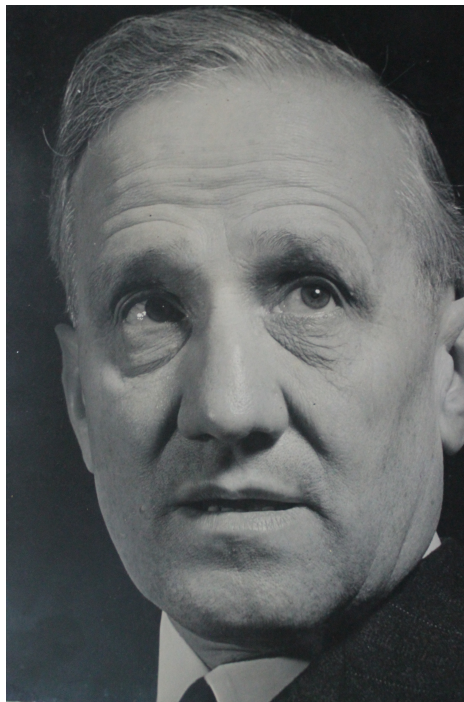


Figure 2: E. Stanley Jones (date unknown)

When the American Methodist missionary Dr. E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973) began to visit the Kumaon foothills in the outer Himalayan region of Uttarakhand (Northern India) around 1915, he would often walk along a series of roughly trodden footpaths toward a large plot of land called Sat Tal. Sat Tal, named after the seven (*sat*) freshwater lakes (*tal*) which surround the region, was significantly smaller than its closest town (Nainital) and had little going on within it. Even today, over one hundred years later, Sat Tal is home to only a few buildings other than STA: it has a small post office, a handful of tea stalls where one can—albeit inconsistently—purchase one's favourite snacks and other odds and ends, one tiny church (kept locked and unused for most of the year), and a YMCA. Today, STA and the

ashram's estate occupy the majority of the Sat Tal region. But in 1915, what is now STA was a (largely unsuccessful) tea plantation owned by a retired British engineer named Mr. Evans. The tea plantation spanned around 300 acres, and Mr. Evans and his wife rented out the estate's cottages to individuals (mostly foreign missionaries) who wanted to escape to the hills from the heat of the Indian summer and rejuvenate themselves alongside the freshwater lakes and the remarkably diverse wildlife. From the Nainital hill station to Sat Tal was about twelve miles on foot, and Jones greatly enjoyed the walk.

Jones, who frequently travelled across the country to some of the biggest and busiest cities in order to preach the gospel after his arrival to India in 1907, found refuge in the idyllic calm of the Kumaon foothills. Along with his wife Mabel, Jones had moved to Sitapur (in the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh) in 1911 in order to take care of several institutions affiliated with the American Methodist Church.<sup>1</sup> Excluding his international travels and travels across India (both mission-related), and his furloughs in the USA, he lived in Sitapur for over three decades, and the stresses of his work took a severe toll on his mental health—especially in his earlier years of work.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his time as a missionary in India, Jones repeatedly experienced what were then described as “nervous collapses.” These forced him to return to the USA on furlough at least twice in order to recover from his physical and mental fatigue.<sup>3</sup> Some of Jones's biographers have suggested that these “nervous collapses” would have been psychologically classified in today's medical vocabulary as some sort of anxiety disorder.<sup>4</sup> Knowing this small yet important detail about Jones's life might help us make sense of why he so often took to the hillside: the engineer's tea plantation was even more remote than the bustling town of Nainital, and its small private lakes offered a pleasant space for physical and spiritual rejuvenation. When living in Sitapur, Jones began to journey to Sat Tal's hills for three months every summer and would swim in one of the freshwater lakes, *Garud Tal* (formerly called *Panna Tal*) whenever the weather allowed. He writes fondly about the several summers that he, his wife and daughter spent at Sat Tal while the land was still owned by the Evans, and one can imagine that—despite professing later that he had never imagined that he would own the place, let alone develop an ashram there—Jones found in the hills of Sat Tal some of the comforts of home.

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<sup>1</sup> Mathews-Younes, *A History of the Christian Ashrams*, 35–36.

<sup>2</sup> Mathews-Younes, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, *A Song of Ascents*, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Mathews-Younes, *A History of the Christian Ashrams*, 39.





**Figure 3:** View from STA's estate of Gurud Tal. The lakeside chapel can be seen at the far-end of the lake.

### 3.1.1. *Jones's Emphasis on the Person of Christ*

When Jones was not recuperating in the relative calm of Sat Tal, he was actively evangelising both in Sitapur and elsewhere in India. Having had his own life positively transformed when he committed himself to Christ's teachings as a seventeen-year old in the US, Jones was a passionate Methodist who wished to share the Christian gospel with whomever would listen to him.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on his earlier years as a young evangelist in India, Jones confessed that he had been a bit naïve in his ideas about other people's receptivity to the gospel—he had unreflectively assumed that everyone with whom he spoke would quickly and eagerly respond to Christian teachings, and adopt them as their own. Instead, he realised that many individuals already inhabited specific religious frameworks which guided their beliefs and actions, so that Jones's explanations of what he deemed to be the key doctrinal points of Christianity did not, he discovered with surprise, seem to offer anything unique or necessary to their religious lives. Jones was pushed into this understanding firsthand while trying to evangelise a Hindu man during his first Indian train-ride—the man found Jones's stories

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<sup>5</sup> Mathews-Younes, *Living Upon the Way*, 5.

compelling, and even seemed to listen with genuine interest, but at the end of the conversation retorted that he had similar stories in his own religion, and the man left the train without showing any interest in learning more about Christianity. Baffled, and battling his disappointment, Jones was forced to reflect on his assumptions regarding evangelism. This early realisation is an important moment which prompted Jones's first substantive shift in the way he approached evangelism. Specifically, Jones began to realise that trying to instill the specific *teachings of Christianity* was not nearly as important as communicating the *person of Christ*. Consequently, he began to emphasise the soteriological impact of an encounter with the living person of Christ; he deeply believed that individuals who thus encountered Christ would be so enamoured with, and drawn by their own need for, Christ that they could do no other than begin to follow Christ's teachings. This shift in focus from doctrine to person, as Jones often indicates in his writings, continued to mature throughout his years as an evangelist. At various points, he re-centred himself through this focus of a personal Christ, and allowed its spiritual gravity to become expressed in his evangelical approaches in different ways.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Jones reached a point, whereby in 1925 he asserted (quoting from his journal from 1917) that "Christianity must be defined as Christ, not the Old Testament, not Western civilization, not even the system built around him in the West, but Christ himself."<sup>7</sup> Around this same time, the emphasis of the *person* of Christ rather than the *tradition* of Christianity was also professed by figures such as Ram Mohan (Rammohun) Roy in his book *The Precepts* (1920)<sup>8</sup> and by Gandhi (whom we will return to in Section 3.1.3), and this emphasis of Christ, rather than Christianity, continued to be articulated by several Hindi spiritual figures, such as Swami Prabhavananda who wrote *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* (1963). Of course, in the light of two millennia of doctrinal disputations in Christian religious history, this plain equivalence between *Christianity* and *Christ* is either disturbingly ambiguous or wonderfully ambiguous, depending on one's level of existential comfort with loosely held definitions without clear creedal formulations. This equivalence effectively transforms the question from "*what* is Christianity?" (and, consequently, "what does one's life look like as a Christian within Christian socio-religious milieus?") to "*who* is Christ?", so that the consequent question is: "what does one's life look like when following Christ and becoming existentially

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, *A Song of Ascents*.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Roy was slightly controversial figure in Christian circles on account of his Unitarian doctrinal views and his rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity. See Zastoupil, "Defining Christians, Making Britons: Rammohun Roy and the Unitarians," 225.

conformed to Christ?” But I shall lay aside for now Jones’s highly personalist definition of Christianity and remain focused on sketching Jones’s evangelism.

### 3.1.2. *Dialoguing with Educated High Castes*

For the first fifteen or so years of working as a missionary in India, Jones concentrated his evangelism on individuals from the lower socio-economic classes—individuals who, using the vocabulary common to his time period, he referred to interchangeably as “low castes,” “untouchables,” and “outcastes.”<sup>9</sup> It was only in the 1920s that Jones began to specifically tailor his evangelical efforts towards individuals whom he described as the “educated high castes.”<sup>10</sup> Jones’s intentional engagements with educated individuals drew upon his academic strengths and ministerial training—Jones had attended school at Asbury College (now Asbury University) in Wilmore, Kentucky from 1903-1906 during which he became a licensed preacher, and was “an enthusiastic and able student.”<sup>11</sup> Numerous people, at different times throughout my fieldwork, narrated the following story about Jones which neatly encapsulates this marked shift from evangelising primarily to lower-caste individuals to engaging with higher-caste individuals. In the 1920s, when Jones was speaking with an educated upper-caste Hindu government official at one of Jones’s recreational activities, the officer asked Jones why foreign missionaries focused all their attention on converting lower-caste individuals. Why, the official wondered, did the missionaries not preach also to the Brahmanical Hindus and others who came from more educated backgrounds? Jones informed the official that he and other missionaries had presumed that Brahmins did not want what the missionaries were offering, to which the official replied, “we do want you, if you come in the right way.”<sup>12</sup> For Jones, this conversation was a revelatory moment which, combined with his initial shift in focus to the person of Christ discussed above, transformed the style of his missionary efforts after the 1920s. Among other changes to his evangelising methods, Jones established round table

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<sup>9</sup> Jones’s biographers—as well as his own writings—give the impression that this evangelical focus on lower castes was in keeping with other standard practices of missionaries at his time. We know, however, that a majority of early missionaries in fact focused their evangelical efforts on upper-caste Hindus; certainly, this was the case for the Jesuit missionaries who approached their missionary work with the understanding that upper-caste Hindus were at the top of the social hierarchy and, if converted, there would be a sort of “trickle down” effect into individuals from lower-caste communities. See, for example Lourdaswamy, “Catholic Church and Dalit-Tribal Movements in India,” 189.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Mathews-Younes, *A History of the Christian Ashrams*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> This story can also be found in multiple sources of Jones’s own writings. See Jones, *Indian Road*, 10; Jones, *A Song of Ascents*, 86.

conferences (1917-1920)<sup>13</sup> in order to promote personal interactions and focused dialogues between Christians, educated Hindus and others, and he later founded STA in 1930. We have thus far highlighted two distinct shifts in Jones's approach to evangelism: firstly, he desired to speak of, and indeed offer to others, the *person of Christ* rather than proclaim particular *doctrinal formulations* of Western Christianity; and secondly, he realised that this sharing of Christ need not be limited to individuals from lower-caste backgrounds. As the Hindu government official had confirmed for Jones, Brahmins and other educated individuals might indeed receive the missionaries' gospel—if only the missionaries managed to come “in the right way.”

But what exactly *was* this “right” way? Evidently, as is suggested in the official's comment, the way in which foreign missionaries had brought the message of Christianity to the untouchables (or Dalits and OBCs in current terminologies of the Indian nation-state) was not “the right way” to bring the same message to Brahmins. The previous chapter highlighted the ways that various “Hindutva” movements which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, along with several other factors that I outlined there (Section 2.3.5) shaped the ways that the philosophical teachings of Advaita Vedanta were consciously presented to both national and international audiences as the true expression of Hinduism and, indeed, as *the* true way of being Indian. “Indianness” was thus being strategically refracted through the prism of this very particular, though highly influential minority, strand of Hinduism. And thus, I contend, as much as Jones was directly influenced by this particular conversation with the Brahmin at the recreational club, he was also inescapably shaped by his cultural locations within these various broader sociopolitical discourses which were conceptually equating “Indianness” with “Vedanta.”<sup>14</sup> Shaped by these direct and indirect influences, Jones determined that “the right way” of bringing the gospel to Hindus would necessarily entail going about it in a way that resonated with Vedantic, Brahmanical styles.

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<sup>13</sup> Some of Jones's biographers date the origin of the round table conferences to 1930. However, oral histories that I collected during my ethnographic fieldwork indicate that Jones's held round table conferences before establishing STA in 1930. Jones's own writings include tangential remarks to do with the origin of the round table conferences. In one instance, he refers to a note “written 8 years ago [in 1917]” in which he developed the style and atmosphere that he wanted to create with his round table conferences. Jones, *Indian Road*, 13. At another point, writing in 1934, Jones claims that he had “listened in for fourteen years” on the round table conferences, indicating that they would have commenced in approximately 1920. Jones, *Christ and Communism*, 218. Thus, I understand the round table conferences to have pre-dated the establishment of STA by approximately one decade.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, Vedanta is itself divided into multiple strands and sects. Scholars are now careful to be specific in their articulations of which of the many diverse strands they refer to; this is not something that Jones specified.

### 3.1.3. *Inspiration of the Spiritual Model of Gandhi*

Jones also had to grapple with the emerging figure of Gandhi who was regarded by some of his contemporaries—Indian and foreigner alike—as a Christ-like figure, and Jones himself frequently described Gandhi in Christian terms.<sup>15</sup> We know that Jones found Gandhi's practices and teachings regarding non-violent resistance to be both highly inspirational and spiritually uplifting—he claimed that Gandhi's resistance gave him a “deeper appreciation of the cross as a universal validity”<sup>16</sup>—and he was thus genuinely interested in learning from Gandhi. Inspired by Gandhi's lifestyle, Jones “wore a khaddar dhoti [traditional Indian garb] on his visit to [Gandhi's] ashram and went barefoot” when he first visited the ashram.<sup>17</sup> Scholars have also noted that Gandhi himself, and later Gandhian ashrams, had a significant influence on the establishment and development of many Christian ashrams.<sup>18</sup> It is thus possible that Gandhi's ashrams (the first of which, Satyagraha—later named Sabarmati—was established in 1915) influenced Jones's own development of STA—perhaps some of the other founders of the Christian ashrams mentioned in Chapter 2 were influenced by Gandhi. Whatever may have been the nature and the extent of Gandhi's influence on the notion of a Christian ashram, Jones sought out Gandhi for specific advice concerning how Christianity might be understood and appreciated by Indians as a truly Indian religion, rather than as a religion of foreigners. Jones's first meeting with Gandhi occurred, according to Jones's own recollection, “soon after [Gandhi's] return from South Africa [in 1915].”<sup>19</sup> One of Jones's biographers, however, dates this meeting to 1919.<sup>20</sup> No matter the precise year when this meeting took place, it is worth highlighting that it occurred, as Jones explicitly points out, significantly before Gandhi had developed a public viewpoint concerning conversions to Christianity in India<sup>21</sup>—Gandhi's discourse surrounding conversion as an undesirable and even unethical or immoral act did not materialize until well over a decade later.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 13, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *A Song of Ascents*, 140.

<sup>17</sup> Haskell Khan, “The India Mission Field in American History, 1919-1947,” 118.

<sup>18</sup> Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Mathews-Younes, *A History of the Christian Ashrams*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> It was in 1931 that Gandhi began to voice his opposition regarding missionary activities in India. Accordingly, in 1931 Jones wrote a letter to Gandhi asking him what precisely it was that Gandhi found so troublesome about conversion. Gandhi replied to Jones in an open letter on 23 April, 1931, stating that he found modern-day conversion to be too comparable to a business venture. A few years later, in 1935, Gandhi again made a strong statement regarding his disapproval of conversion. These correspondences are outlined in Martin, “Missionary of the Indian Road.”

But, when Jones approached Gandhi around 1920, Gandhi's public opinion on conversion was still relatively ambivalent. Apparently without regard for pleasantries, Jones directly presented his key question to Gandhi: "How can we [Christian missionaries] make Christianity naturalized in India, not a foreign thing, identified with a foreign government and a foreign people, but a part of the national life of India and contributing its power to India's uplift? What would you, as one of the Hindu leaders of India tell me, a Christian, to do in order to make this possible?"<sup>23</sup> (The reader will, no doubt, have already noted that Jones's repetitive use of the descriptor "foreign" suggests that Jones was keenly aware of Christianity's strong reputation as a religion of foreigners—something Chapter 2 explored in detail.) Gandhi responded, "First, I would suggest [that] all of you Christians, missionaries and all, must begin to live more like Jesus Christ. Second, practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down. Third, emphasize love and make it your working force, for love is central in Christianity. Fourth, study the non-Christian religions more sympathetically to find the good that is within them, in order to have a more sympathetic approach to the people."<sup>24</sup>

In this response, we see that Gandhi made no effort to convince Jones that his main desire—to "make Christianity naturalized in India"—was fundamentally flawed or spiritually unnecessary. Instead, Gandhi provided Jones with advice that further strengthened Jones's spiritual commitment to preaching the *person* of Jesus, and offered some guidance which likely not only reinforced Jones's general resolve to create STA, but also presented Jones with a model of what spiritual life at an ashram could look like. In the present day, the individuals at STA who knew Jones best continue to affirm that Gandhi had exercised a profound influence on Jones's desire to build an ashram. In 2016, Lillian Wallace (a former Manager of STA, a close companion of Jones, and a frankly remarkable nonagenarian woman who remains actively involved in STA and other endeavours) explained to me that one main reason that Jones wanted to build an ashram was "because he was a close friend of Gandhi. And Gandhi had Hindu ashrams in Gujarat ...people always came to Gandhi's ashram and Gandhi always was insistent that they work. People should work [in order to] break down prejudices, [...] break down the caste system. [Because] the outcastes weren't treated like people, but they are all people! Brother Stanley [like Gandhi] also wanted people to work. Everybody. And he led by example—Brother Stanley cleaned the latrines!"<sup>25</sup> Additional features of the present-day

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<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, 65; Jones, *Indian Road*, 102–3.

<sup>25</sup> Wallace, Lillian (Former Manager of STA.) Interviewed by Nadya Pohran. Sat Tal Christian ashram, India. September 2016.

STA ashram, such as the month-long daily programme that Jones implemented at the “Summer ashram” (and, in later years, at the “Winter ashram”) were specifically modeled on Gandhi’s ashram.<sup>26</sup> This discipline includes following a daily rhythm of rising early for personal meditation, attending morning meditation (*dhyān*) with the group, eating meals together, and participating in at least one hour of assigned work; I return to these details below and also in Chapter 4. The remainder of the day at STA during the SoE programme consists of group spiritual teachings, personal time, prayer time, and meals, and the evening concludes with “fellowship,” during which hymns are sung and/or testimonies are shared.<sup>27</sup>

#### 3.1.4. STA’s Ashram Ideals

Considering these three distinct lines of force—Jones’s desire to share the living person of Christ rather than the specific doctrines of Western Christianity, the encouragement he received to approach Hindu Brahmins with the gospel, and the advice and the spiritual model of Gandhi—it is not surprising that Jones eventually established a Christian ashram. Firstly, as Sister Vandana has argued, ashrams in Hindu contexts often focused on the charisma and the personality of the individual guru rather than on subscribing to a specific set of doctrinal claims in the way of religious institutions.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, ashrams, it would have seemed to Jones, could facilitate sharing and teaching about the person of Christ, thereby incorporating a guru-focused spiritual practice which is common to many Hindu spiritual traditions.<sup>29</sup> Yet, rather than declare himself as a human guru (a declaration which would not have appeared out of the ordinary to some of his Hindu audiences) Jones instead proclaimed that it was Jesus, and not Jones himself, who was the true guru of STA. Although Jones, as we shall see in Chapter 4, is often spoken of by present-day ashramites as a remarkable and noble spiritual teacher, and is sometimes even given reverence as if he were their guru, Jones never elevated himself to this honorific status; he instead preferred the identity of a “Brother,” and frequently referred to others as his brothers and sisters.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, ashrams were deeply embedded in the cultural heritages of some aspects of Brahmanical Hindu cultures, and were traditionally regarded as abodes of serenity, holiness,

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<sup>26</sup> Martin, “Missionary of the Indian Road,” 115.

<sup>27</sup> This daily rhythm was repeated throughout the week during the Summer and Winter ashram programme, but the schedule was not followed on Sundays when—unless a church service was offered—there was no ashram programme. Instead, individuals were instructed to keep silence for the entire day.

<sup>28</sup> Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians*, 16–37; Taylor, “Christian Ashrams.”

<sup>29</sup> Jones, *Victory Through Surrender*, 70.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 83.

and spiritual gravity. And, as we see in *The Christ of the Indian Road*—published five years before establishing STA—Jones was already conversing with some itinerant Hindu ascetics and had visited specific ashrams such as the ashram of Rabindranath Tagore in Shantiniketan, near Calcutta.<sup>31</sup> The significance of the ashram for Jones’s mission is often highlighted by Jones’s family members: thus, when Eunice Jones Mathews, Jones’s daughter, was interviewed in 1974 about her father’s work in India, she spoke about the influences that had led Jones to establish STA. She explained, “It bothered Daddy that among the Christian community so many new Indian Christians had abandoned their cultures to take on a Western veneer. My father very much wanted to bring back as much of the Indian culture into Christianity and bring the Christian community back into their own culture...The Ashram was an answer for him.”<sup>32</sup>

And so Jones, along with Reverend Yunas Sinha and Miss Ethel Turner, sought to purchase the roughly 300 acres of land from the tea plantation owners in 1929, and began transforming the land into STA. According to the “Ashram Ideals” that he penned in 1930, Jones desired for STA to espouse vegetarianism, group meditation, Bible-study, prolonged silence, service (“working with the hands”), creativity, and simplicity.<sup>33</sup> Taking these desires into account, I have identified three key themes that are present not only in these “Ashram Ideals” but also throughout Jones’s writings and sermons. Importantly, he stipulated that (1) he wanted the ashram to be “truly Christian and truly Indian.” He also wanted (2) all individuals “who sincerely desire to find God” to be welcome at STA, regardless of whether they were of the Christian faith, a different faith, or even “no faith.” And (3) he envisioned the ashram as a “miniature Kingdom of God,” where individuals from a myriad of different spiritual and religious traditions would not simply seek out readymade answers handed to them but would instead “*be* the answer” by living out a noble spiritual life inspired by, and centered on, Jesus. Each of these three features of Jones’s vision for STA are fundamental to the spiritual environment he established at STA; thus, I will consider each of them in turn. In Section 3.2, my focus shall be on the first of them, and the discussion will set the stage for Chapter 4; I shall return to the latter two features in Chapter 5.

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, 184–85.

<sup>32</sup> Mathews-Younes, *A History of the Christian Ashrams*, 78.

<sup>33</sup> Jones, “E. Stanley Jones on the Ashram Ideal (1930).”





Figure 4: The entrance to STA

### 3.2. THE QUEST FOR THE “TRULY CHRISTIAN AND TRULY INDIAN” AT STA

Of course, Jones’s aim to create a community which was both Indian and Christian must be understood within the larger context of the somewhat complicated relationships between Indian cultures and the Christian faith which had developed over the preceding centuries—as Chapter 2 explored in some detail. But we should not interpret the vision of Jones only as a historically-shaped quest to combat the perception of Christianity as a foreign and foreigners’ religion; we also need to understand how Jones conceptualised the key terms *Christian* and *Indian*, and how these understandings, in turn, shaped each other. The question of what precisely counts as either *truly Christian* or *truly Indian* is, of course, dependent on the individual figure or institutional authority who is staking the claim to authenticity. As Harold Coward asks pointedly, “What does it mean to be a Hindu? Or a Christian? [...] Who decides? [...] According to which criteria?”<sup>34</sup> The debates relating to true or authentic expressions of Christianity versus incomplete, or even completely erroneous, expressions are not limited to our discussion of STA or even, more broadly, to inculturated Christianity within Indian contexts; rather, anthropologists have demonstrated that such contestations over fidelity and

<sup>34</sup> Coward, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, xvii.

identity are, in fact, a rather common phenomenon within Christian contexts.<sup>35</sup> These negotiations over membership are, as I argued in Chapter 1, especially distinctive of certain Protestant contexts where the distinctions between insider and outsider are clearly marked out in terms of the acceptance or the rejection of creedal formulations.

### 3.2.1. “Truly Christian...”

Jones’s concern that the ashram be recognised as truly Christian can be understood in the light of these contested socioreligious identities. Indeed, Jones wished that STA would be recognised by others as a distinctively *Christian* ashram, but the crucial question, of course, was: Christian by *which* or *whose* criteria? For Jones, as we have seen, the defining features of Christianity extended beyond any specific doctrinal or institutional-ecclesiological context, as he certainly did not wish to merely import the forms of Western Christianity that he had grown up with—even his own Methodism, though he was associated with this denomination throughout his missionary work, was not something that he wished to transplant into STA’s spiritual soil.<sup>36</sup> And yet, Jones was adamant that STA was—beyond any shadow of doubt—deeply Christian. In his autobiography, Jones writes clearly, “some might surmise [that] because we have a Hindu term that therefore the Christian Ashram is an amalgamation of Christianity and Hinduism. Nothing could be further from the reality. The Christian faith, being life, assimilates. The Christian faith reaches into the culture of every nation and takes out things, which can be assimilated into its purpose, but in doing so makes something entirely new and different.”<sup>37</sup>

I am not here primarily interested in addressing the various ways that Christian systematic theologians or scholars working in the fields of critical religion and Orientalism would critically evaluate Jones’s assertion that “the Christian faith .... assimilates.”<sup>38</sup> To be sure, this declaration might be critiqued today as a form of Christian epistemic violence, or even cognitive imperialism, which refuses to foreground the alterity of Indic worldviews but instead seeks precisely to *assimilate* them to a Christian standpoint.<sup>39</sup> However, Jones himself would have been unaware, just like Upadhyay in our previous chapter, of such important

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Webster, *The Anthropology of Protestantism*; Robbins, “The Anthropology of Christianity: Unity, Diversity, New Directions. An Introduction to Supplement 10.”

<sup>36</sup> Jones, *Christ and Communism*, 215.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, *A Song of Ascents*, 220–21.

<sup>38</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

<sup>39</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective*.

critiques of Western *representations* of Eastern worldviews like Said's—which were formulated in the late 1970s—but, equally crucially, my interest in this chapter lies elsewhere: I offer a phenomenologically-sensitive and interpretive account of *why* and *how* Jones sought to navigate the terrains of Indianised Christianity while being deeply committed to the person of Christ. In other words, Jones's emphasis that the spiritual core of STA is indeed Christian, and STA is not a mere “amalgamation of Christianity and Hinduism” raises the question: precisely what did it mean to Jones himself for something or someone to be *Christian* at all?

We know from Jones's own writings that his views concerning Christianity changed substantially during his time as a missionary in India, and he consciously set aside some of the doctrinal convictions that he once held dearly. However, in spite of these changes, Jones consistently regarded his Christian faith as the dominant framework through which he interpreted his life and the world around him. Time and time again, it was the *person* of Jesus on whom Jones focused his attention, and he believed that this personal Christ, removed from the specific trappings of Western Christian cultures, could be passed on to Indians. In stark contrast to many other missionaries during colonial times, including the “British Baptist trio” of missionaries mentioned in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2.3), Jones was not interested—at least not consciously—in presenting Indians with a form of Christianity that was deeply bound to its Western cultural expressions. This vision of an Indianised Christianity for Indians is made clear in Jones's influential book *The Christ of the Indian Road* (1925) which not only was an immense success amongst missionaries in India and in other mission fields, but which also became a bestseller in the USA.<sup>40</sup> In it, he asserts, “I am frank to say that I would not turn over my hand to westernise the East, but I trust I would give my life to christianise [*sic*] it. It cannot be too clearly said that they are not synonymous.”<sup>41</sup> And, in the same book, he argues that India is able to “take from Christ” in a way it could not do earlier because only now it is “able to disassociate [Christ] from the West.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, we see that from Jones's own Christ-formed standpoint, the *assimilative* power of Christianity, as much as that word might grate on our post-Saidian subjectivities, indicates not so much a reduction of all human religiosity to Christianity, but their spiritual elevation into a new life in Christ. To repeat Jones's words: “The Christian faith, *being life*, assimilates.”

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<sup>40</sup> Haskell Khan, “The India Mission Field in American History, 1919-1947,” v.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, 87.

This same sentiment of the life-giving Christ whose transformative power was being stifled by institutional Christianity was expressed earlier by the well-known Indian Christian poet Narayan Vaman Tilak (1862-1919).<sup>43</sup> And, of course, similar sentiments had been expressed by figures such as Upadhyay and Ramabai, whom we encountered in Chapter 2 (Sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3) It was this conviction that the categories of “Christianization” and “Westernization” were not synonymous or congruent which enabled Jones to consider establishing a Christian ashram which would be deeply imbued with an Indian ethos.<sup>44</sup> And yet, at the same time, Jones held on to certain convictions regarding the theological uniqueness of Christ, and he never veered away from this Christocentric standpoint.

### 3.2.2. *Situating Jones Within Broader Discussions of the Foreignness of Christianity*

I believe it will help us to make sense of Jones’s own understanding of Christianity if we stand back for a while from the 1920s and sensitively resituate him within some of the broader historical discussions regarding the foreignness of Christianity in India. As Chapter 2 demonstrated, Christianity had gained a reputation within some Indian public spheres of being exclusively a religion of foreigners; I argue that we can conceptualise this view as occupying one far-end of a spectrum of views regarding whether or not Christianity in India is, or can ever become, sufficiently Indian. There are, however, several scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds who occupy the opposite far-end, and who have articulated a counter-argument which, I think, is important to consider in this discussion—not the least because these arguments force us to reflect critically on the claim that Christianity outside European milieus should be conceptualised in terms of the conceptual binary of *either* foreign *or* native. Social scientists Chad Bauman and Richard Fox Young reject the notion that there is one normative Christianity to which Indian expressions of Christianity should be compared; they instead emphasise what they refer to as the fundamental “Indianness of Christianity.”<sup>45</sup> In asserting this notion, they decidedly veer away from the missions-focused scholarship that had focused largely on the question of whether, and to what extent, the various forms of Christianity found across different non-European cultures were deemed acceptable to European missionaries.

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<sup>43</sup> Tilak had claimed, “If Christ could be presented to India in his naked beauty, free from the disguises of western organization, western doctrines and western forms of worship, India would acknowledge Him as the Supreme Guru, and lay the richest homage at His feet.” Quoted by Winslow, *Narayan Vaman Tilak: The Christian Poet of Maharashtra*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 3–6.

<sup>45</sup> Bauman and Young, *Constructing Indian Christianities*.

Crucially, Bauman and Young instead champion the notion that “Christianity” has never historically existed as a monolithic religion. Scholars who work in the field of Early Christianity similarly agree that the definitional problems relating to precisely what makes an individual or a community “Christian” have been present since the first century, thereby adding more historical basis to the sociological claim that Christianity is not one singular belief or social formation.<sup>46</sup>

In this context, the theologian Jaroslav Pelikan has argued that throughout the centuries Christ has been interpreted through multiple images which have been inflected with—and which, in turn, reflect—specific sociohistorical idioms; thus, in different social contexts we see Christ described as the “King of Kings,” or the “true image of God,” the “Universal Man,” the “Teacher of common sense,” the “Liberator” and so forth.<sup>47</sup> From the perspectives of such a historical understanding of the multiple images of Christ and of Christianity, by consciously refusing to privilege one particular iteration (whether cultural, temporal, or denominational) of Christianity over others, the various versions of, and variations on, Christianity which exist throughout the world (including the many inculturated expressions scattered throughout India) would neither neatly fit into one putative norm nor would they be castigated as deviations from such a norm. According to this viewpoint, in short, rather than being a *prescriptive* norm, the original and the early expressions of Christianity are primarily *descriptive* or *programmatic* models of what Christianity could look like—but they are not exhaustive or definitive of Christianity itself.

Where might Jones have placed himself on this spectrum of, on one side, conceptualising Christianity as *either* foreign *or* native in the way that became commonplace in some public spheres of India (of course, with the resounding agreement that it was foreign!) or, on the other side, asserting that Christianity could be seemingly infinite in its diverse iterations, through its processes of—borrowing the phrase from the apostle John—“taking on flesh” of different cultures, landscapes, and time periods? I place Jones somewhere in the middle of this conceptual continuum. We have seen that Jones fundamentally rejected the idea that Christianity was exclusively a religion of foreigners: he desired to create a sociocultural atmosphere within whose hospitable spaces Indian Christianity could be practised.

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<sup>46</sup> Harrison, Humfress, and Sandwell, *Being Christian in Late Antiquity*; Boyarin, *Border Lines*; Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews*.

<sup>47</sup> Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 206–19. For a summary and discussion of Pelikan’s argument, see Barua, *Debating Conversion*, 159.

Furthermore, as Jones makes clear in his writings, he did not want to hold onto teachings merely for the sake of hallowed tradition; he was prepared to take on any practice that might enable him to draw closer to Christ, just as he was also willing to discard anything that he felt might hinder this spiritual closeness. Thus, he wrote in an almost iconoclastic tone, “we must fearlessly go over our faith, our methods, our organizations, our programs, and our spirit, and ask concerning each one the question: ‘Does it unlock anything? Does it unlock reality, does it fit into the soul of India, does it bring me to God and to people, is it really redemptive, is it according to the mind of Christ?’ And we must be willing to lay aside rusted keys that no longer fit into things and no longer bring us to vital touch with Christ and life.”<sup>48</sup>

But at the same time, the potential boundlessness of Christian expressions suggested by the scholars who argue against any normative core whatsoever to Christianity would likely have seemed to be too much of a doctrinal stretch for Jones. Numerous Christian theologians throughout the ages have claimed that there *is* a central structure to the Christian faith which is defined through the scriptural bases of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,”<sup>49</sup> even though, of course, they have interpreted the fundamental concept of “one” in quite divergent ways. Writing in this vein, we know from Jones’s public reaction of disappointment to the *Rethinking Missions* report<sup>50</sup>, for example, that Jones thought that some attempts at presenting the gospel in an inculturated style went too far; he felt that some Christian missionaries had effectively abandoned some of the most important components of the message of Jesus by being seemingly endless in their openness to the various expressions of human faith.<sup>51</sup> Jones’s stance on the necessity as well the limits of inculturation would have resonated with the theology of Indian Christians such as Kali Charan Banerji (incidentally the uncle of Upadhyay) who, some decades before Jones arrived on the scene, had already distinguished in 1892/93 between “substantive Christianity,” that is, certain foundational doctrines which remain invariant and “adjectival Christianity,” that is, specific styles of ecclesiastical organisations and creedal confessions with which the former are clothed.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jones, *Round Table*, 201.

<sup>49</sup> Ephesians 4:5

<sup>50</sup> *Rethinking Missions* was a collaborative report published in 1932 and aimed at reforming American Protestant missionaries’ approaches to evangelism. It drew heavily on (and spoke favourably of) Jones’s writings such as *The Christ of the Indian Road* which promoted indigenous Christianity, and called to replace the focus of “church plantation” (and, consequently, conversion) with the teaching of “Christian values”.

<sup>51</sup> Haskell Khan, “The India Mission Field in American History, 1919-1947,” 206–9.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas, *Christian Indians and Indian Nationalism 1885-1950: An Interpretation in Historical and Theological Perspectives*, 76.

So, we might ask at this stage, how did Jones demarcate between what could be “laid aside” and what was essential, or even normative, to the Christian faith? What, if anything, made one mode of belief and spirituality distinctively *Christian* while making something else fall outside the Christian faith? And what precisely did Jones want to express institutionally in making the ashram “truly Christian”? Jones’s standpoints on these questions are important for us to understand, not the least because, as we will see in Chapter 4, there remains even today a deep ambiguity surrounding these topics among some of the ashramites of STA.

### 3.2.3. *Being Christian As Surrendering to Jesus*

One note that is consistently struck in Jones’s own writings and sermons is that the sum and substance of Christianity is Christ himself; for Jones, Christianity was therefore grounded in the continual practice of an ongoing self-surrender to Jesus.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, we recall Jones’s declaration that “Christianity must be defined as Christ.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, instead of viewing Christianity in terms of a socio-historical phenomenon or an ecclesiastical system or a doctrinal structure, Christianity is to be seen as a way of being-in-the-world which is vitally shaped by, rooted in, and oriented to the personal encounter with the living reality of Christ. In his PhD thesis on the thought and work of Jones, Paul A.J. Martin cautions his readers, however, from oversimplifying Jones’s understanding of Christianity, and argues that “Jones’s distinction between Christ and Christianity was not as radical as it sounded at first.”<sup>55</sup> Martin then proceeds to articulate the various ways that Jones “insisted that the Gospel record about Jesus was substantially historically accurate.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, while Jones indeed emphasised individuals’ need for an encounter with a personal Christ, he was still very much rooted in the teachings of mainstream Christianity which consistently teaches that the figure of Christ is defined by his salvific actions and words as recorded in the New Testament narratives. It was the Old Testament, rather than the New Testament, from which Jones distanced himself. I have heeded Martin’s cautionary words and not oversimplified Jones’s distinctions between Christ and Christianity; nonetheless, at the same time, it is undeniable that Jones did, time and time again, emphasise that he understood that the heart of Christianity in its truest form can be

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<sup>53</sup> Mathews-Younes, *Living Upon the Way*, 113.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Martin, “Missionary of the Indian Road,” 62.

<sup>56</sup> Martin, 62.

distilled down to the person of Jesus. Thus, I seek to understand what Jones thought about the person of Jesus, and how this crucial belief played out in Jones's own personal life.

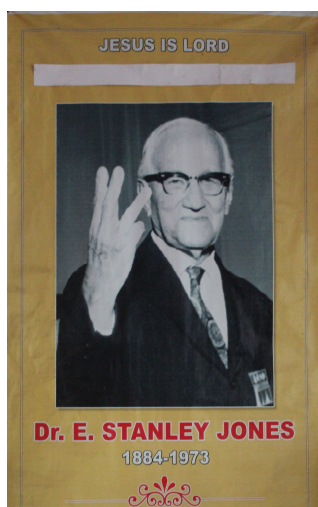


Figure 5 (left): A large poster in the dining room, featuring Jones holding up the "Jesus is Lord" posture.



Figure 6 (right): A hand-painted "Jesus is Lord" artwork, displayed in the Midlakes building.

One of the most tangible demonstrations of Jones's unwavering focus on the person of Jesus is the style of greeting that Jones established for STA: Jones would hold up three fingers as he verbalised the affirmation "Jesus is Lord." This quickly took the place of other customary greetings such as "good morning" or "hello," and the action on its own could also serve as a mode of greeting amongst ashramites even during silent hour.<sup>57</sup> To this day, many ashramites still hold up three fingers when they greet one another, saying either "*Yeshu Masih hai*" or "Jesus is Lord," and the ashram is decorated with various figurines, paintings, and photographs of three fingers held up in this manner. There is even a large print of Jones in his later years, holding the posture. Jones's constant efforts to thus affirm the Lordship of Jesus is explained throughout his writings, where he emphasizes that the earliest Christian creed was simply "Jesus is Lord," and he interprets this confession to mean that self-surrender to Jesus is the earliest Christian attitude and practice. Indeed, Jones spoke, somewhat paradoxically, of bondage to God as the highest form of freedom, and taught that the way to achieve such freedom was through becoming bound to Jesus in an offering of self-surrender. As readers who are familiar with the New Testament may pick up on, there are clear resonances of this motif

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<sup>57</sup> Jones, *Conversion*, 64.



with the claims of being a bondservant (Greek: *doulos*) to Jesus Christ—an avowed identity with which Paul, Timothy, James, Peter, and Jude all describe themselves.<sup>58</sup>

This particular theological paradox of bondage as freedom is, furthermore, not unique to Christian contexts. As one example among many, the cowherd maidens (*gopis*) in the paradigmatic *Rasa Lila* narrative of the *Bhagavata Purana* (10.29.1-4) declare that they have been “captured” by their beloved Lord Krishna, and are thus enraptured by and attuned to him, but it is through these devotional processes of entanglement, which oscillate through moments of painful separation and joyful union, that they become free.<sup>59</sup> I am not aware of Jones’s familiarity with the pervasiveness of this paradox of bondage as freedom across religious traditions, but, most interestingly, Jones engaged with certain Buddhist philosophical teachings in order to emphasise the need for Christians to become bound to Jesus. After outlining (and agreeing with) the Buddha’s teaching that desire (*dukkha*) leads to suffering, Jones went on to proclaim that the solution to becoming free from suffering was not, as Buddhism teaches, the dissolution of desire, but rather the reorientation of desire to Christ. Thus, in 1933 Jones wrote, “...there is no possible way to get rid of one desire except to replace it by a higher desire. One does not get rid of desire by its suppression, but by its expression in a higher form.” When our love, Jones continued, becomes “fastened upon a personality like Christ, [it] rises into a higher form and is redeeming...The unsatisfied desire is therefore removed, not by its extinction, but through its satisfaction. The love of the lower is cast out by the love of the higher.”<sup>60</sup>

#### 3.2.4. *The Spiritual Supremacy of the Living Christ*

This above passage is just one of many examples through which Jones makes it abundantly clear that he believed that true richness of life could not be found without Jesus, while also demonstrating how Jones could skillfully interweave certain aspects of Christianity into an Indic worldview. Jones’s emphasis on the centrality of the person of Jesus is also seen in the round table conferences at which he facilitated interreligious dialogues from 1917. When reflecting on these dialogues in his written work, Jones notes his gratitude to the participants for having taught him about Hinduism and Indian culture through these exchanges, and he further professed that elements of his own Christian faith had been altered through these

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<sup>58</sup> See Romans 1:1, Philippians 1:1, James 1:1, 2 Peter 1:1, Jude 1:1 in which each writer begins their respective letters by identifying themselves as a bondservant of Jesus.

<sup>59</sup> Schweig, “The Rasa Lila of Krishna and the Gopis: On the Bhagavata’s Vision of Boundless Love.”

<sup>60</sup> Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering*, 54.

interactions.<sup>61</sup> He describes his participation as a form of “sympathetic listening,” and we can understand him as having entered into dialectical exchanges with the Hindus who attended these sessions.<sup>62</sup> Throughout these dialogues, Jones required that individuals (when it was their turn to speak) did not argue vociferously with others and further stipulated that they must not attempt to convince others to follow their own religion, nor were they permitted to enter into intellectual arguments about questions of doctrine or historicity. Individuals were not even allowed to speak “abstractly” or to “merely discuss religion.” Rather, individuals must share, from the resourceful wellsprings of their personal experiences, what their religion had done for them.<sup>63</sup> In the midst of regulating these terms of discussion so as to encourage individuals to speak of their own personal experiences, through creating an environment where he would share his own experiences of Jesus with others, Jones would also unabashedly seek to demonstrate that Jesus offered something unique to all humanity for spiritual life. It must be made clear that Jones’s Christ-centered worldview did not allow the possibility that any other religious pathway was as soteriologically efficacious as the Christianity that he had himself embraced. In this vein, in 1935 he wrote, “I am persuaded that the Christian religion...has more of the Kingdom of God within it than any other system. It has within it the noblest ideals, the finest character, and the most self-giving service to the human race of any religious system....”<sup>64</sup> Jones earnestly desired to contribute to creating and participating in a “miniature Kingdom of God” (I shall return to this in Section 3.5), and he wanted to do whatever he could to inspire and enable others to equally participate in fostering such a community. Yet, to Jones, this God-centered community would be best achieved when striving to enact the theological ideals encapsulated within Christianity, and, consequently, this goal would be most effectively reached through striving to become more like the person of Jesus.

Jones’s perception of Christ as the supreme and unique personal God is further seen through the ways in which he occasionally re-interpreted the religious lives of his dialogue partners through Christocentric prisms. For example, though Jones was no doubt aware of plenty of examples of individuals whose lives were vitally shaped by unwavering devotion to a deity other than Jesus—*bhaktas* (devotees) were one of the six classifications that Jones himself retroactively applied to the individuals who had frequented his round table

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<sup>61</sup> Jones, *Round Table*, 48.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, *Victory Through Surrender*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Jones, *Round Table*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Jones, *Christ and Communism*, 222.

conferences<sup>65</sup>—he remained adamant that devotion to anyone other than Jesus was simply not as spiritually transformative an experience as was devotion to Jesus. Jones’s substantiation for this claim is based on his personal reflections on anonymized individuals who, according to him, did not undergo the same type or degree of spiritual transformation as individuals who are devoted to Christ—this conviction consistently forms the basis for his arguments in most of his books. For Jones, it was Jesus alone who could imbue individual lives with positive spiritual significance and effect salvific transformations, and it was the spiritual teachings of Jesus alone which could “heal a society” and “give life” to individuals and communities. Consequently, it was only Jesus who was fully worthy of being the supreme object of our self-surrender.<sup>66</sup> Despite respecting—and even, as we noted above, learning from—some of their points of philosophy, Jones described non-Christian religions with terms such as “inadequate”<sup>67</sup> and “bankrupt,”<sup>68</sup> and insinuated that even their most redemptive qualities were, in fact, the result of “an importation from Christian sources.”<sup>69</sup> He thus felt that India was plagued by “a spirit of almostness” in which individuals, through their various religious beliefs and practices, had come so close to realising God and yet very few of them had actually arrived at this goal.<sup>70</sup> Referencing Jones’s consistent declarations of Christianity as the supreme religion, Martin therefore notes that “in spite of the many inclusivist tendencies in Jones’s thought, a bedrock of exclusivism remained.”<sup>71</sup>

Jones’s view in this regard was, of course, not unique to him; Catherine Cornille has identified T.E. Slater (1840–1912) as “one of the first advocates of this fulfillment theory” which asserts, in Slater’s words, that “the Christian Gospel thus offers all that the Vedanta offers, and infinitely more...Christ includes all the teachers.”<sup>72</sup> According to this fulfilment theology, human beings have certain innate religious yearnings which can be satisfied by a series of “lower” religions which are progressively replaced by the “highest” one, namely, Christianity, into which they “evolve.” We can see this view quite clearly in Jones’s assertion

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<sup>65</sup> Jones, *Round Table*, 27.

<sup>66</sup> Jones, 269.

<sup>67</sup> Jones, 57.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, 78.

<sup>69</sup> Jones, 93.

<sup>70</sup> Jones, 128.

<sup>71</sup> Martin, “Missionary of the Indian Road,” 109.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism*, 98.

above regarding the “almostness” of non-Christian religions.<sup>73</sup> According to this view, the lower religions are ordained by God for the purpose of gradually training human beings to receive the fullest revelation in Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

### 3.2.5. *Christian-in-the-making*

Lest, however, we hastily characterise Jones as a domineering religious man who championed all expressions of Christianity while wholly repudiating all non-Christian ones, I want to make it clear that Jones also felt that the lives of a significant number of Christians were equally characterised by a lack of intimacy with God as indicated by their absence of a sense of fellowship with Christ.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Jones readily admitted that Jones himself, Western civilisation, and the Christian church were all in continual processes of becoming reformed into a more Christ-like existence, and he explained all of their shortcomings as the inevitable result of the world not yet becoming fully conformed to Christ. It was only Jesus, Jones proclaimed, who was impeccably beyond reproach. Thus, Jones writes, “I will have to apologize for myself again and again, for I’m only a Christian-in-the-making. I will have to apologize for Western civilization, for it is only partly christianized. I will have to apologize for the Christian church, for it, too, is only partly christianized. But when it comes to Jesus Christ, there are no apologies upon my lips, for there are none in my heart.”<sup>76</sup>

This antipathy towards top-heavy ecclesiastical organisations is also reflected in Christian writers such as Kierkegaard for whom the organised structures of Christendom diverted individuals from a genuinely Christian existence which should be shaped by a salvific transformation through the wholehearted emulation of the suffering of Christ.<sup>77</sup> The focus here is on the “raw Christ”—the person of Jesus himself—and not on the Christ who is refracted through creedal formulations, social formations, or ecclesiastical organisations. All of this reveals, once again, that for Jones to be authentically *Christian*—that is, to truly become transformed through spiritual intimacy with Christ and, through this ongoing process of Christ-centered discipleship, to realise God—necessitated conscious, unwavering, and complete self-

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<sup>73</sup> Incidentally, this view of lower religious yearning acting as pedagogical tools and pathways to fuller religious revelation is similarly claimed by some Advaita Vedanta philosophies, but the theological similarities and divergences between these Advaita philosophies and Jones’s Christian theology cannot be explored here.

<sup>74</sup> Hedges, *Preparation and Fulfillment: A History and Study of Fulfillment Theology in Modern British Thought in the Indian Context*, 40–41.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, *Round Table*, 51.

<sup>76</sup> Jones, *A Song of Ascents*, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Law, “Kierkegaard’s Anti-Ecclesiology: The Attack on ‘Christendom’, 1854-1855.”

surrender to the person of Jesus so as to enter a state of ongoing transformation. Jones desired that all individuals, including those who already inhabited Christian contexts, would make conscious efforts to “vertically convert” themselves (a process which Jones distinguished from “horizontal conversion” i.e. moving from one religious identity to another<sup>78</sup>) by way of making Christ the central point in every aspect of their life.<sup>79</sup> In other words, for Jones the real conversion is not so much the lateral (“horizontal”) shift across socio-religious identities but the inner (“vertical”) turn to the living Christ.<sup>80</sup>

Ensuring that STA was a *Christian* ashram, then, meant for Jones more than it being simply a place where Christians happened to gather, for he was insistent, in the anti-ecclesiastical tone of Kierkegaard who declared that “Christendom is a prodigious illusion,”<sup>81</sup> that individuals and institutions who identify as Christians might not, however, be fully committed to Christ. STA was also more than just a place where Christian doctrine happened to be taught. In claiming the ashram to be resolutely *Christian*, I therefore understand Jones to have been signaling his desire that STA would be a place where individuals would learn to surrender their everyday worldly selves fully to Jesus and to actively cultivate patterns of Christian discipleship. From this reflection, I interpret STA’s daily practices like morning *dhyan* (which, as I shall elaborate upon below, took the form of a 45 minute period of individual contemplation of a selected biblical passage) and *shramdaan* (a one-hour work period in which individuals worked wherever help was needed in the ashram) as spiritual tools aimed at enabling individuals to become more Christ-like. Consistently throughout his writings, Jones argued that commitment to Christ was to be displayed through the ongoing transformation of one’s attitudes, instincts, and practices<sup>82</sup>—and so the virtues cultivated through such transformation were both the means to reach that end of Christ-likeness, and simultaneously they were the expressions of approaching that end.

### 3.2.6. “...and Truly Indian”

Having explored some dimensions of what Jones meant by his claim that STA should be “truly Christian,” we can now begin to explore what he meant by his claim that it should

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<sup>78</sup> Jones, *Round Table*, 71.

<sup>79</sup> Jones, *Conversion*, 45.

<sup>80</sup> See also Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 155.

<sup>81</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 22.

<sup>82</sup> Jones, *Conversion*, 43, 65–82; Jones, *Indian Road*, 83; Jones, *Christ and Communism*, 222.

also be “truly Indian.” I have already outlined the various ways that Jones was influenced by his wider socioreligious milieu to associate Indianness specifically with forms of Brahmanical Hinduism and Advaita Vedanta. We might think of Jones’s thought-patterns through a series of conceptual equivalences in this way: to be truly Indian was to be culturally Hindu, and to be culturally Hindu was, in turn, to be familiar with Brahmanical cultural idioms which have Vedantic undertones. Ergo, a *true* Indian is an individual whose life is shaped by Vedantic notions, values, and experiences. Although Jones’s writing does, at times, demonstrate an understanding that Hinduism contained many different sects and philosophies<sup>83</sup>, he often wrote and preached in ways that used the term “Hindu” to refer exclusively to individuals from educated and higher-caste backgrounds who were clearly aligned with Brahmanical, Vedantic philosophies and practices. Such Brahmanical descriptions are epitomised in Jones’s description of Jesus as “the Christ of the Indian Road,” in which Jones envisions that Brahmins would imagine Jesus to be wearing the garments of an ascetic.<sup>84</sup>

We find some further evidence that Jones’s understanding of Hinduism was deeply reflective of Brahmanical qualities in the ways in which he taught other foreigners—especially his close friends and family—about Hinduism. Acharya James K. Mathews, Jones’s son-in-law and the man whom he appointed in 1971 to be his successor as the chief Acharya of STA, was, by his own admission, profoundly influenced by Jones. Thus, when interviewed in 1974, Acharya Mathews proclaimed an understanding of Hinduism which had strikingly Brahmanical resonances: “The Hindu spiritual ideal is self-cultivation. It is self-control. It is finally self-negation. The further you go into Hinduism, the more withdrawn you become from the world, and the more you concentrate on yourself and your identification with God.”<sup>85</sup> This understanding of Hinduism is saturated with notions of world-renunciation and rigorous asceticism (*sannyasa*) that simply do not play a significant role in many devotional and folk expressions of Hinduism. Importantly, it is not that this understanding of Hinduism is incorrect (insomuch as there certainly are expressions of Hinduism which match Mathews’s description) but it is grossly incomplete, for it reductively equates the diverse socioreligious traditions of Hinduisms with specific strands of Brahmanical Hinduism, as if there were no other diverse expressions on the ground. On the contrary, there are many Indians who self-identify as coming from Hindu family backgrounds but who have no affinity with the “high” forms of Brahmanical

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<sup>83</sup> Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering*, 56.

<sup>84</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Mathews-Younes, *A History of the Christian Ashrams*, 87.

Hinduism, and who would instead see their Hindu social lifestyles as robustly world-affirming. In fact, as Chapter 4 shall explore in greater detail, STA witnessed an increasing entry of individuals who clearly do not affiliate themselves with Brahmanical Hinduism in the 1990s, when STA established its one-month long SoE programme with heavily subsidised rates so as to allow all individuals, irrespective of their socio-economic status, to visit the ashram. Nonetheless, looking back at 1930, when Jones envisioned STA as “truly Indian,” it is clear that he sought to imbue it with specifically Brahmanical idioms that would seem acceptable and familiar to Hindus from such backgrounds.



Figure 7: Jones (front left) gives a sermon to a group of ashramites at the lakeside chapel in STA, overlooking Gurud Tal. (Date unknown.)

Along these lines, Jones stipulated in his “Ashram Ideals” that “the dress, the food, the manner of eating would be Indian. As we expect Hindus to come and share life with us for longer or shorter periods the food would be vegetarian.”<sup>86</sup> Jones thus encouraged men and women to wear “traditional Indian clothing,” and there are many photos in the STA archives which show Jones himself dressed in such Indian garb, sometimes with a garland of flowers around his neck—though there are also just as many photos of him dressed in a suit and tie while walking around the ashram grounds. But we can notice how Jones, in his succinct use of the term “Indian,” again equates Indian identity with Brahmanical Hinduism—the adherence

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<sup>86</sup> Jones, “E. Stanley Jones on the Ashram Ideal (1930).”

to a vegetarian diet is not something that all Hindus deem to be an important dimension of their lifestyle, and surely it is not a spiritual marker of the various other Indian religious individuals, for example, many Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and Jews throughout India. As for the vegetarian food, it is possible that Jones was aware of the ways in which some non-Christian Indians feared that beef-eating Christians might actively coerce them into eating meat, and that he wanted to avoid even the slightest suspicion that such an incident might occur at STA.<sup>87</sup> But this stipulation of an “Indian diet,” just like that of the wearing of an essentialised “Indian clothing”—both reminiscent of the *accomodatio* of Roberto de Nobili which we discussed in Chapter 2—was possibly due to Jones’s intention to create a sociocultural atmosphere which would be familiar to Brahmanical Hindus and within which they would feel welcomed, all the while exploring and, Jones hoped, embracing the teachings of Christ.

### 3.3. ETHNOGRAPHIC MOMENTS: THE QUOTIDIAN CONTESTATIONS OVER “TRULY CHRISTIAN AND TRULY INDIAN”

Having now painted, with broad brushstrokes, some of the features with which Jones envisioned the social backdrop of STA in order to make it “truly Christian and truly Indian,” I turn to my ethnographic fieldwork to demonstrate some of the ways that Jones’s ideals from 1930 unfold in present-day lived experiences. Thus, I offer “thick” descriptions of three phenomena: the morning meditation (*dhyān*), the practice of individual labour (*shramdaan*), and the (non) vegetarian cuisine served at STA. As the reader will observe, the last of these three is rather distinct from the first two. While the first two can be broadly seen as present-day phenomena which embody Jones’s founding visions, the third, as we will see, disrupts this pattern due to the ways that the lived-out realities of the current practices surrounding the occasional supply of non-vegetarian cuisine contradict what Jones had envisioned for STA. But, rather than interpret the third as indicative of a failure to live out Jones’s founding vision, I argue that this rupture ultimately bolsters the point that the first two phenomena begin to demonstrate: namely, that the STA community’s embracing of Indian cultural idioms occurs only when such practices are thought to enrich the Christian ethos of STA. As such, “Christian” occupies the place of the primary substantive identifier for which “Indian” becomes a descriptive adjectival qualifier—a concept that we saw in the previous chapter in the context of discussing inculturated Christianity (Section 2.3), and which we will return to in more detail

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<sup>87</sup> The extent to which forcing Hindus to consume meat was historically practised by Christians in India remains a contested topic. See, for example, Robinson, “Sixteenth Century Conversions to Christianity in Goa.”



in the theoretical framework that informs Chapter 5. In other words, I argue that, in Jones's vision, STA ashramites are primarily *Christians* who are Indians, and not *Indians* who merely happen to inhabit Christian spiritualities. We recall that Jones himself emphasised that STA is first and foremost a *Christian* ashram. Thus, my aim is to highlight some of the various ways that some STA ashramites navigate the processes of being both "truly Christian" and "truly Indian."

### 3.3.1. *Dhyan*

Though we will only consider *dhyan* briefly, it is important to have some sense of this aspect of spiritual practice at STA. Etymologically, the Hindi word *dhyan* comes from the Sanskrit root *dhya* which means "to think of," and *dhyan* is today often translated into English as "meditation"—at STA, *dhyan* encompasses scriptural reading, silent meditation, and sharing one's reflections with the group. Depending on the size of the group at any given time, the morning *dhyan* either takes place in a small room in the Midlakes building (the main building at STA and one of the few original buildings from when the grounds had been a tea plantation nearly one hundred years ago) or in the spacious chapel. Both rooms feature several artistic renditions of STA's iconic "Jesus is Lord" motto, and the chapel is especially well-decorated with uplifting spiritually-themed art pieces.

During my fieldwork in 2016, most individuals removed their shoes before entering the building for *dhyan*—an action of respect and reverence which is practised in many other religious contexts throughout India. We focused on one chapter from a biblical text each day—the *dhyan* during my fieldwork was centered on the Gospel of Matthew and then, when we finished reading through it, the Gospel of John. We usually spent about fifteen minutes in silent reflection before being invited to share any of our reflections with, or direct our questions to, the wider group. The reflections varied in depth and type depending on the individuals who were present; during the SoE, which I focus on in Chapter 4, individuals often picked up on phrases and verses which highlighted the power of Jesus, especially his healing power, while at the Winter Ashram that I attended, the theme of healing was rarely mentioned.

### 3.3.2. *Shramdaan*

We can also consider STA's practice where all individuals participate in an hour-long *shramdaan* (work period) and other forms of labour. The word *shram* (etymologically related to the word *ashram*—"no work") can be translated as work or labour and the word *daan* (also

often used at ashrams to refer to monetary donations) can be translated as generosity; *shramdaan*, then, is the voluntary giving of oneself through the act of labour. In spite of the fact that STA refers to the hour-long period as *shramdaan* on its written schedule, many of the ashramites at present-day STA simply use the English phrase “work period,” even when conversing in Hindi. Today at STA there is, at least among some of the ashramites (particularly those who have been coming to the ashram for a long time, and especially those who knew Jones personally), an eager enthusiasm to join and participate in the longstanding tradition of STA’s work period. Through their keen involvement, what can appear as a mere quotidian action is also combined with their conscious intent and thereby holds the spiritual potential to be transformed into a religious act; in other words, labour is not simply a physical exercise but is a spiritual activity.<sup>88</sup> In order to understand this distinction, it would be useful to first articulate some of the precise reasons why Jones desired everyone at STA to do their own dishes. On one level, washing one’s own dishes is a simple and straightforward practice of STA to circumvent the need for paid labour. At this level of interpretation, the act of washing dishes would be viewed as a daily chore and a “mere routine” which some social scientists have contrasted with a ritual.<sup>89</sup> Yet, at another level, seemingly mundane actions such as washing one’s own dishes and participating in the one-hour daily “work period” were intentionally implemented as ashram rules by Jones for the purpose of removing any sociocultural prejudices associated with the traditional orders of Brahmanical social hierarchy, in which those who are thought of as ascriptively “lower” would have to serve those who are ascriptively “higher” in socio-ritual and socioeconomic status.<sup>90</sup> Washing dishes is thus a labour of love in which one lovingly offers one’s self to the ashram.

Anthropological discourses on ritual and performative action offer some helpful insights into this discussion. I argue that Jones, and the subsequent Acharyas, envision labour as an action through which certain understandings regarding both the spiritual value of labouring as well as the conscious rejection of social stigma surrounding certain types of labour could be ritually encoded and expressed. In anthropological discussions of ritual action, Victor Turner’s definition of ritual as “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities

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<sup>88</sup> Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*, 155.

<sup>89</sup> Bowie, 155.

<sup>90</sup> For case studies of contemporary instances in which this hierarchy is played out, see Razu, “Towards a Critical Theology of Risk-Taking,” 356–62.

or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interest" often enters the discussion.<sup>91</sup> However, Fiona Bowie, drawing upon the work of Audrey Richards from the 1950s, cautions anthropologists from developing too narrow and overly nuanced definitions of what counts as ritual; she instead asserts that the study of ritual should be broadened to include actions that do not immediately strike one as particularly meaningful or symbolic, and which are not limited to intentionally attempting to influence a supernatural or "preternatural" realm.<sup>92</sup>

More useful for our understanding of dishwashing at STA in ritual terms is Bobby C. Alexander's definition of ritual, in which ritual is conceptualised broadly as a "performance" through which everyday acts are transformed into something meaningful and potentially powerful.<sup>93</sup> Interpreting ritual as a kind of cultural performance or drama allows Alexander to emphasise that "enacting" (which he compares to "acting" and contrasts with "just pretending") "contradicts neither the notion of belief nor the practice of theatrical acting."<sup>94</sup> Thus, in addition to playing a role in actively *reimagining* the cognitively inscribed order of social status, physical labour was also described by Jones as a selflessly performed act that allowed the individual to become more like Jesus through an active surrender of the sense of a hierarchised self. That is to say, the everyday act itself—unlike the ritualised actions usually focused on in the context of Turner's definition of ritual—was only made powerful through the inward self-surrender of the individual performing the action. Thus, this spiritualised activity of washing dishes can be viewed as a recurring event through which every individual—often three or even four times daily<sup>95</sup>—concretely participates in a physical enactment of both the rejection of social hierarchy and the intentional practice of selfless action as a means of ongoing reformation and re-orientation to Christ who is himself often described by the New Testament as a "servant."<sup>96</sup>

Although individuals were clearly informed of the expectation that they would each wash their individual dishes at the beginning of their stay at STA, this point was not highlighted time and time again—and, through being loosely enforced, this created an opportunity for individuals to determine the extent to which they would participate in the labour. While some

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<sup>91</sup> Turner, "Symbols in African Ritual," 183.

<sup>92</sup> Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*, 155–56.

<sup>93</sup> Alexander, "Ritual and Current Studies of Ritual: Overview," 139.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander, 154.

<sup>95</sup> Three daily meals were served at STA; tea was also served daily at 4pm.

<sup>96</sup> Mark 10:45 and Luke 22:27

ashramites (predominantly, I noted, the men whose wives or mothers accompanied them) did at times nonchalantly shirk the task of washing their own dishes, a number of individuals were adamant about their desire to “religiously” wash their own dishes after every single meal and tea-time. I recall here Uncle William’s response when I once offered to wash his dishes along with my own, sometime during the October 2016 Winter session. Uncle William—a long time ashramite of STA and someone who had heard Jones deliver public lectures in Mumbai—was in his mid-80s and on that day he seemed particularly low in energy. After I offered, he looked me squarely in the eye and told me, “I informed you early on that you would become like my daughter. And so, *as my daughter whom I love*, you can wash my plate today. But tomorrow, I will return to washing my own. You know, Dr. Stanley Jones also washed his own plates...! It’s the way of the ashram!” This sort of confessional declaration epitomises the awareness that offering selfless labour was a way of imitating the beloved founder Jones (who himself had sought to imitate Christ). Further, it demonstrates that Jones’s desire for social statuses to be equalised and for all individuals to participate in labour in communitarian settings has been successfully embraced by some ashramites. Indeed, Uncle William emphasised, his sanctioning of his plate to be washed by someone else was not because he viewed himself as ascriptively higher to others; such surrendering itself was, instead, another expression of his ongoing cultivation of the labour of love.

### 3.3.3. (Non-)Vegetarian Cuisine

We can also look at the practices surrounding food and eating at STA in order to come to a better understanding of some of the precise ways that STA inherited and sought to promote Jones’s vision of STA as “truly Christian and truly Indian.” As early as pre-World War II<sup>97</sup>, anthropologists were particularly interested in food and eating habits because food reveals, and sometimes also re-affirms, significant details about the social cohesiveness of a cultural group.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, as Eliot Singer argues, the act of eating is “not just an instrumental behavior for obtaining nutrients” but it is also “a means of expressing beliefs, ideals, and ambitions.”<sup>99</sup> Just as through the physical ingestion of food, the *biological* health of one individual is maintained, through the participation of specific individuals at a shared meal, certain *social* boundaries are established and defended. Indeed, the consumption of food is a truly socio-

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<sup>97</sup> Richards, *Land, Labour, and Diet in Northern Rhodesia: An Economic Study of the Bemba Tribe*.

<sup>98</sup> Mintz and Du Bois, “The Anthropology of Food and Eating.”

<sup>99</sup> Singer, “Conversion Through Foodways Enculturation: The Meaning of Eating in an American Hindu Sect,” 195–96.

biological event: the types of material food that are prepared and eaten, as well as the socialised actions and activities that occur leading up to, during, and after the “breaking of bread” are particularly revealing about the self-understanding of a given group. When we consider the food practices of STA we see, strikingly, two somewhat incongruous phenomena: (1) Jones envisioned the ashram as serving vegetarian food so as not to ward off (Brahmanical) Hindus; and yet (2) STA today regularly serves eggs, fish, and meat—all of which are clearly considered to be “non-vegetarian” in an Indian context of diet.



Figure 8: Signs are used in the STA dining room to indicate which dishes are veg and which are non-veg

This conspicuous dissonance surrounding the practice originally envisioned by Jones and the present-day lived out negotiations hinges on vegetarianism—a dietary choice that, as I shall elaborate upon below, is inseparable from religious practice and identity in various Indian contexts. This association of “vegetarianism” and “religion” was clearly evident at STA. For example, in a series of pre-fieldwork administrative emails with Mr. Vijay Patni, the estate Manager of STA, I inquired about whether STA currently followed a vegetarian diet. In his reply, Vijay informed me that the ashram did cook a lot of vegetarian food but pointed out that it also served fish and meat occasionally. “Not to forget,” he added pointedly, “that it is a *Christian* Ashram.” He followed up that sentence with a kind and jovial assurance that I, a vegetarian, would still “get my veggies.” But his explicit assertion to me that STA is “a *Christian* ashram”—in the context of an inquiry about vegetarian food—was quite striking. To outsiders to Indian sociocultural contexts, it might not be immediately evident that he was implicitly working through a chain of conceptual equivalences: “Vegetarian food = *Hinduism*; STA is a *Christian* ashram; therefore, STA also serves fish and meat.” And, thus, non-vegetarian food was regularly available from STA’s kitchen.

### 3.3.4. *Considering Indian Practices alongside Christian Identity*

Holding these three ethnographic descriptions in mind, we can proceed to explore the episode relating to (non-)vegetarian cuisine in further detail since, as I indicated above, it ruptures the pattern established by the previous two phenomena—here, the present-day reality directly contradicts Jones’s envisioned ideal. Firstly, it might be helpful to summarise some key points about vegetarianism within Indian socioreligious contexts more broadly. As Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi highlights in his book chapter which explores responses to meat and meat-eating in central Gujarat, vegetarianism has been articulated by some members of various right-wing Hindu affiliations as the most noble choice of diet.<sup>100</sup> Fully aware of this association between vegetarianism and religious purity, ashrams—that is, Hindu ashrams—have typically followed strict vegetarian diets not only because vegetarian cooking is a simpler and more affordable way of cooking/eating for large numbers of people, but also because ashrams were populated by upper-caste Hindus who viewed non-vegetarian food as impure. In addition to following a strict vegetarian diet, some Hindu ashrams would additionally avoid certain foods which are understood to excite passion, hatred, and anger—most commonly including spicy food, garlic, and onion.<sup>101</sup> The justification for avoiding such items is to facilitate the generation of an internal environment in which the seeker can focus on the spiritual life, and not consume foods which are understood to evoke vicious emotions.<sup>102</sup>

Moving on from this theme, I consider the non-vegetarian cuisine cooked and consumed at STA as a practice that asserts and re-affirms that STA is unequivocally *Christian* and, as such, is not bound by such Hindu ideologies concerning food purity. I do not mean to suggest that STA offers non-vegetarian food with the same militant fervour as the various social groups and individuals who have recently engaged in “beef-eating protests” as a way of enacting what C. Sathyamala refers to as “a political act of subversion” against the current ban against slaughtering and eating beef.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, STA was careful to always clearly label their food as either “veg” or “non-veg,” and to always have a “veg” option available whenever non-vegetarian food was being served. As I learned throughout my fieldwork, for many at STA the decision to cook non-vegetarian food was nothing other than a practical choice which allowed

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<sup>100</sup> Ghassem-Fachandi, “Hyperbolic Vegetarian,” 81.

<sup>101</sup> Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians*, 11.

<sup>102</sup> Ghassem-Fachandi, “Hyperbolic Vegetarian”; Marriott, “Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis”; Singer, “Conversion Through Foodways Enculturation: The Meaning of Eating in an American Hindu Sect.”

<sup>103</sup> Sathyamala, “Meat-Eating in India,” 1–3.

meat-eaters to eat meat while ensuring that vegetarians could still follow a vegetarian diet. That is to say, there was no specifically anti-Hindu vehemence to ensure that meat must be consumed—although, as a vegetarian myself, I was often at the receiving end of individuals’ genuine confusion, utter bafflement, and jovial mocking regarding why a vegetarian diet would be maintained by individuals who did not otherwise adhere to Brahmanical purity laws. Throughout my many conversations with Acharya Ghosh, for example, he never once communicated even the slightest indication that STA’s non-vegetarian cuisine had anything to do with consciously subverting Hindu ideological equivalences between food consumed and embodied spirituality. Indeed, when I asked him if he could recollect the timeline or the rationale for introducing non-vegetarian food into STA, he simply shrugged his shoulders and offered this rather mundane explanation as his best theory: “Maybe around the same time we stopped using oil lamps and got flush toilets...probably because the ashram had more money? It is the same with us having sweets after dinner—people like to eat well.”

And yet, I argue, the absence of a clear adherence to vegetarianism at STA effectively serves to establish a boundary line—conceptual as much as social—between that which is normatively Hindu and that which is normatively Christian. This is an iteration of a broader phenomenon that is well-accepted by various social theorists: the self, and indeed the group that one self-identifies with, is determined dialectically in relation to others; we define who we are through the transactional processes of seeking to clearly delineate who we are not.<sup>104</sup> *Self-identity* is thus the obverse of *other*-construction.<sup>105</sup> To be clear, the STA management was acutely aware that their inclusion of non-vegetarian food rejected the Brahmanical practices of eating vegetarian food—the very practices that Jones was aware of and thus had laid down that the ashram would serve vegetarian food.

Although, as I shall explore in greater detail in Chapter 4, many of the original features of the ashram have changed over the years (and, specifically, some of the more Brahmanical dietary characteristics have become less palatable, literally speaking, to the ashramites as the social demographics have changed), I find it striking that vegetarianism was one of the first features of STA’s “Indianness” to be cast aside. By lumping together non-vegetarian food with after-dinner sweets, the non-vegetarian diet is conceptualised as a welcome luxury and a

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<sup>104</sup> Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach*.

<sup>105</sup> A thought-provoking argument concerning gaining an understanding of the self by way of understanding one’s relationship with others is articulated by Paul Ricoeur. In a somewhat different vein than has been suggested in this paragraph, Ricoeur argues that “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other.” Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 3.

pleasant treat—not as an element which potentially obstructs the atmosphere of “Indianness” conceived as “Vedantically Hindu.” I wonder if this somewhat casual slippage is because the strict adherence to a vegetarian diet was never conceptualised as a spiritual practice which had the potential to positively transform individuals through making them more Christ-like. After all, other “Indian” elements of STA such as the morning *dhyan* or the *shramdaan*, as I have discussed above in Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2, did actively promote Jones’s vision of STA to be a place where individuals would live out a life of obedience to Christ. But, in contrast to these other practices of contemplation and action, I speculate that vegetarianism was simply not conceptualised as having this type of transformative potential.

Keeping in mind the extent to which Christianity had been perceived by many Indians as being a religion of foreigners (Chapter 2), I contend that the initial success of STA was vitally dependent on Jones’s effort to weave together Christian and Indian aspects so that they might both peacefully co-exist in the lifeworld of STA. In such a way, cultural idioms that signified “Indianness” were permitted—and even encouraged—to be a part of spiritual life at STA provided they did not impinge upon one’s Christian existence. Thus, practices like *dhyan* and *shramdaan* continue to be embraced by STA leadership even if, as we shall see in Chapter 4, they are sometimes met with differing views by the individuals who come to STA. And yet, as suggested by the instance of (non) vegetarianism, these very Indian aspects had a certain dispensable quality to them, and thus had the potential to be discarded when they no longer seemed to serve the purpose of deepening one’s Christian faith. I think that many at STA conceptualised vegetarianism as, to use one of Jones’s own analogies, a “rusty key” which could be “laid aside” once it was revealed to no longer “unlock” a closeness to Christ. “What,” Acharya Ghosh once pointedly posed to me in casual conversation, “did eating veg food do for one’s spiritual life?” The Acharya’s reluctance to embrace spiritual practices that did not seem to explicitly bring individuals closer to Christ is one that we shall see again in Chapter 5 in the context of adopting a prolonged period of silence.

By considering phenomena such as the morning *dhyan*, *shramdaan*, and the (non-)vegetarian cuisine, we can note some of the embodied ways through which Jones attempted to inform and inflect the atmosphere of STA with characteristics of both Christianity and Indianness. But, by exploring the ways that each of these three practices are negotiated in the lived realities of ashramites today, we can further observe that, in the effort to be “truly Christian and truly Indian,” it would seem that each identity is not pursued with an equal vigour. Rather, “truly Christian” is given preference and is, thus, placed as “higher” than “truly



Indian”—something that is not entirely surprising when considered in the light of Jones’s own equation of Christianity with Christ, and, subsequently, of Christ with life.

### 3.4. “ALL WHO SINCERELY DESIRE TO FIND GOD”

We can now sketch an overview of the second and the third visions that Jones had for STA when he established it in 1930 (Section 3.1.4). The reader can recall that Jones wanted it to be a place where all individuals (regardless of their faith affiliation, or lack thereof) who sought God would be welcomed into the spiritual community of STA. Just as in the case of understanding what Jones precisely meant by STA being “truly Christian and truly Indian,” we must also ask here: what did Jones understand “sincerely desiring” and “God” to mean? Must the act of *seeking*—part and parcel to *finding*—follow a specific pattern or protocol? Was “God” to be used as a synonym for “Jesus”—i.e. the personal Christ whom Jones dearly loved and preached about? These questions, as we shall see, will become vitally important in Chapter 5 and, thus, I shall return to them in more detail later on. For now, one point regarding Jones’s view of “sincerely desiring to find God” will have to suffice: Jones was clearly aware of the vast ways that various individuals attempted to seek God, and, referring to the various religious expressions in India alone, Jones observed, “I have found India God-stirred, but still seeking. There is not yet that sense of finding.”<sup>106</sup> Thus, Jones believed that the majority of Indians to be plagued by a state of continual seeking without finding—an “almostness” in their questing, as we have seen (Section 3.2.5). Jones contrasted this with Christians who, he was convinced, had attained their “finding” via Christ, even though they were Christians-in-the-making who had to become progressively more conformed to Christ.

### 3.5. “BECOMING THE ANSWER” BY LIVING OUT A MINIATURE KINGDOM OF GOD

Noting the ways that India was “God-stirred, but still seeking,” Jones further wanted the very community of STA to “be the answer” (as opposed to simply seeking answers) by living out a miniature kingdom of God. Earlier in this chapter (Section 3.2.4) I discussed Jones’s statement that “the Christian religion...has more of the Kingdom of God within it than any other system” in the light of his conviction that Christianity (rooted in Jesus) was morally and spiritually superior to other religious traditions and spiritual leaders.<sup>107</sup> And yet, Jones’s

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<sup>106</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 35.

<sup>107</sup> Jones, *Christ and Communism*, 222.

statement contains additional nuances that I had to set aside from our discussion until now. The full quotation reads:

I am persuaded that the Christian religion, *even as it is now organized with all its faults*, has more of the Kingdom of God within it than any other system. It has within it the noblest ideals, the finest character, and the most self-giving service to the human race of any religious system....I repeat that the Christian religion *in its ideal state* would be [synonymous with the Kingdom of God], *but I am not dealing with that ideal system...*<sup>108</sup>

I have used italics to emphasise the eschatological nuances contained in this viewpoint: namely, Jones conceptualised Christianity (i.e. as taught and modeled by Jesus Christ) as an ideal state which diverse historical Christian expressions (i.e. the socioreligious expressions that Christians indwell and are limited to) can never reach. We have seen this theme elsewhere in Jones's writings (we recall that he described himself as a "Christian-in-the-making") and there are, of course, a host of other Christian theologians who have articulated more or less this same viewpoint—from the Apostle Paul in the first century, to, as we have seen, Kierkegaard. But, since we wish to gain an understanding of what Jones meant by his desire for STA to be a "kingdom of God in miniature," it is especially important to note that Jones associates the eschatological *ideal* (that is, the fully-perfected version) of Christianity with the phrase "the Kingdom of God."

Jones, who graduated from Asbury theological seminary in 1907, was perhaps shaped by the influential writings of the distinguished Princeton theologian Geerhardus Vos, who wrote in 1903 about the teachings of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God in which he distinguished between the "present" and the "future" Kingdom of God; he indicated that the immanent "manifestation" in historical time was only "partial" and would come to fulfillment in the eschatological future.<sup>109</sup> Vos described the activities of Christian communities as being part of an "internal kingdom" which still required them to go through "a lengthy process"<sup>110</sup> of spiritual transformation.<sup>111</sup> This eschatological theme had also been highlighted by John Nicol Farquhar, one of the most well-known Christian missionary figures in India in the 1910s and the 1920s, and someone with whose arguments Jones was familiar. Farquhar had argued that there are many riches in Christ which are yet to be unearthed and many of Christ's teachings are not

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<sup>108</sup> Jones, 222. Emphasis mine.

<sup>109</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, 45–47.

<sup>110</sup> Vos, 58.

<sup>111</sup> Vos, 76.

properly understood and appropriated, and this process of discovery requires the efforts of the entire “human family.” It is only when the biblical promise that all the nations shall be brought under Christ reaches its eschatological fulfilment that the “religious genius” of India, reformed by Christ, will come alive in his light.<sup>112</sup> Jones resonated with Farquhar’s missionary approach—in 1925 Jones described it as “a vast improvement on the old method [of attacking the weaknesses of other religions]”<sup>113</sup>—but he additionally wanted to go beyond it by actively setting up an environment where, through open, non-aggressive dialogue, he could introduce individuals to “the positive presentation of Christ.”<sup>114</sup> Thus, for Jones, we see that the Kingdom of God that he wished to establish at STA was conceptualised as both the trans-historical ideal of Christianity (or, at least, the conscious act of striving toward that ideal) and a dialogical environment through which Christ could be presented in historical contexts to particular individuals. These theological nuances, as we shall see in Chapter 5, are of the utmost importance to understanding some of the present-day dynamics that unfold at STA.

### 3.6. CONCLUSION

We have explored in this chapter some of Jones’s motivations for, and methods of, endeavouring to ensure that STA was truly Christian and truly Indian. Because of the ways that concepts like “Christian” featured so prominently in Jones’s formation of his 1930 “Ashram Ideals,” we were thus prompted, in turn, to seek to understand how Jones understood what it meant to be Christian, and how he conceptualised the relationship between Christianity and Western society. As we saw, Jones’s proclamation that he was *Christian* was just as consistent and resolute as his proclamation that *Christianity* was not limited to its Western expressions—for Jones, Westernisation and Christianisation are not synonymous processes, just as spiritual rootedness in Christ and Christian identity are indelibly linked. My ethnographic vignettes indicate that this particular desire to make STA “truly Christian and truly Indian” continues to be played out in STA through several embodied expressions, including *dhyān*, *shramdaan*, and (non-)vegetarian cuisine. Subsequently, we asked the question: did Jones imagine “Christian” and “Indian” as two individual identities peacefully coexisting alongside each other, or was it a fusion or merging of the two identities into one cohesive form? We saw the various ways that Jones prioritised the *Christian* identity over and above any other identity marker. Along with his aim of “truly Christian and truly Indian,” Jones also envisioned STA as a place where all

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<sup>112</sup> Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, 64.

<sup>113</sup> Jones, *Indian Road*, 13.

<sup>114</sup> Jones, 13.

individuals “who sincerely desire to find God” would be welcomed, and where a “miniature Kingdom of God” would be lived out. As we shall see in the forthcoming chapters, these three foundational visions are put to the test during the decades following his articulation of them in 1930. Specifically, the formation of the SoE in 1991 would challenge the understanding of what the hybridity of both “truly Christian” and “truly Indian” looks like— a theme that I explore in more detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4:

# THE SCHOOL OF EVANGELISM AND ITS CHALLENGE TO THE IDEAL OF “TRULY CHRISTIAN AND TRULY INDIAN”

### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

Sometime around 5:30am, the first bell of the morning rang and, somewhat resentfully, I cast off the woolen blanket from my tired body and prepared to step out of bed. I could almost picture the watchman grinning mischievously as he rang the bell in the darkness, making it CLANG CLANG CLANG and echo throughout the otherwise quiet hills. Even the song birds had barely woken up. My hands fumbled underneath my pillow, searching for my torch, and when I found it I robotically turned it on and began to scan the room for spiders. It was early September and, in the persistent monsoon rains, more of these creepy-crawlies than usual were inclined to make their homes within any dry shelter they could find. My room, uninhabited for weeks before my arrival, appeared to be an especially welcoming place for the palm-sized spiders that thrive in Sat Tal’s tropical climate. I knew I was safe as I slept—one day before leaving Delhi for the ashram I had purchased a mosquito net which was really more like a tent—but I always performed my ritual scan before working up the courage to exit my mosquito-free fortress.

But spider-scanning was not supposed to be my first morning ritual. Indeed, according to the ashram’s schedule, I was supposed to have woken up well before the 5:30 am bell for my own personal meditative practice.<sup>1</sup> The 5:30 am bell was then to serve merely as a warning

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<sup>1</sup> The daily schedule for the SoE was as follows:

5:30am – First bell  
6:00am – Morning *dhyan*  
8:00am – Breakfast  
9:30am – Work period  
10:30am – Morning lesson  
12:30pm – Lunch  
1:30 – Individual time  
4:00pm – Chai break  
4:30pm – Afternoon lesson  
6:00pm – Dinner  
7:30pm – Evening fellowship hour

or preparatory reminder for individuals to join the group's morning meditation (*dhyan*) at 6 am in the small chapel-like room in the Midlakes building. In my first few weeks of living at STA, still relatively unaccustomed to the practice of personal meditation, if ever I woke up before the first bell, I used the time to go on an early-morning jog, or to wander through the hills with my phone, searching for an adequate mobile connection in order to be able to load and read my emails. Despite my fervent, far-and-wide seeking for a 3G signal, one could hardly call my quest meditative. I was evidently not the only one who slept in until the first bell rather than waking up early for personal meditation: many a time, as I walked briskly to the group *dhyan* to avoid being late, I was joined by several men from Rajasthan who stayed in a cottage near to my own room and who rubbed the sleep out of their eyes as we stumbled groggily to *dhyan* together.

This experiential disjuncture between that which is *normatively expected*, or *prescribed*, and that which *actually happens* is a re-occurring phenomenon often observed (and, indeed, theorised upon) by ethnographers; events rarely occur in the precise ways that one envisions them.<sup>2</sup> Through articulating the minute and sometimes mundane events of the SoE, this chapter explores the disjuncture between that which is expected to occur and that which actually occurs by offering four phenomenologically-sensitive ethnographic descriptions which highlight two different layers of disjuncture. A first layer is seen in the ways in which the development of the SoE in the 1990s contrasted starkly with some of Jones's original visions for STA (see Chapter 3, Sections 3.2, 3.4, and 3.5). The SoE was developed in the 1990s under the leadership of the newly appointed Acharya R.S. Verma and the guidance of the former Acharya D.P. Titus, who wished to create a programme aimed at teaching and equipping individuals about some of the basic tenets of Protestant Christianity. The programme, which was launched in 1991<sup>3</sup> and attracted a handful of individuals who were working as independent evangelists, was dubbed "the School of Evangelism" and celebrated its 25-year anniversary during my fieldwork in September 2016. In direct contrast to the round table conferences envisioned by Jones (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.4) where individuals from

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<sup>2</sup> Lambek, *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*; Lessa and Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*; McGuire, *Lived Religion*; Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion"; Stern, *Changing India: Bourgeois Revolution on the Subcontinent*, 37.

<sup>3</sup> A group of individuals called the *Khrist Bhaktas*, who express their devotion to Jesus at a Catholic ashram in Varanasi by the name of Matri Dham, share, in a broad sense, many socio-economic demographics with the students of the SoE. Most interestingly, research on the *Khrist Bhaktas* also pinpoints the *Khrist Bhaktas*' origins to "the period between 1992 and 1994." San Chirico, "Khrist Bhaktas: Catholics and the Negotiation of Devotion," 28.

different religious contexts were invited to speak about their personal experiences, the SoE is aimed specifically at individuals within Christian contexts and takes as its starting point the assumption that individuals can be reasoned into a Christian worldview. This shift in focus, along with heavy financial subsidies from a Methodist church in Delhi so as to keep the costs of attending the SoE low, correlated with a noticeable change in the type of individual who came to STA: many of the SoE participants are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or come from low-caste Hindu families.<sup>4</sup> As I elaborated on in Chapter 3, Jones envisioned creating a spiritual community in which Hindus could feel culturally at-home—and he did, with varying degrees of success, manage to create such an atmosphere at STA. But the sociocultural demographics of some of the SoE students, and their increasing presence at STA over the last three decades or so, is a sharp contrast to the Brahmanical and Advaita Vedanta-inflected Hindus envisioned by Jones in his 1930 “Ashram Ideals.”

In addition to highlighting and exploring some of these demographic contrasts, this chapter simultaneously explores a second layer through which the disjuncture between that which was expected and that which has actually occurred is manifested: the expressions of Christianity that are highlighted and taught by the spiritual teachers of STA are noticeably different than the ones spoken of by the SoE students. Notable differences in conviction, belief, and practice between teachers and students are—at least to some degree—often expected due to generational shifts, but for cultural anthropologists these differences are especially fascinating and thought-provoking. These on-the-ground variations of Christianity variously accentuate and give shape to the differing ways that Christianity can be conceptualised, spoken of, and practiced; furthermore, the ways through which these divergent expressions of Christianity are expressed often reveal important aspects of the relational dynamics between the teachers and the students. In other words, through paying close attention to some of the differences between the teachers and the students at the SoE, we not only “see in action” multiple diverse expressions of lived Christianity, but we can also use these differences as a sort of focal lens through which to gain a deeper understanding of teacher-student relationships at the SoE.

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<sup>4</sup> This social status was especially true of the group of men who came from Rajasthan, many of whom shared one of two surnames, indicating that they belonged to the same caste: “Meena” (listed as a Scheduled Tribe in Rajasthan and as an Other Backward Caste in most parts of Madhya Pradesh) or “Kharadi” (literally, a “turner” who works with wood).

Thus, both the disjunctures—between (1) Jones’s envisioned Hindus and the SoE students, as well as those between (2) the Christianities expressed by the SoE students and the teachers—will be discussed in this chapter. It might be helpful to think of the former as a diachronic disjuncture relating to varying demographic contexts across time and the latter as a synchronic disjuncture. These two types of spatiotemporal disjunctures, of course, cannot be fully disentangled from each other—not only because the first disjuncture has an obvious effect on the second due to the timelines involved, but also because the latter sometimes points back to the former, especially as the SoE teachers purposely reference Jones’s original visions for STA when justifying their present-day actions and beliefs. Nonetheless, it is useful to conceptualise these two disjunctures as distinctive threads, even if only as a functional maneuver to facilitate our ethnographic exploration.

To investigate some of the reasons which led to the development and the execution of the SoE, and to further explore some of the ways that these disjunctures play out on the ground, I sketch four ethnographic vignettes, each of which is pivoted on one of four key themes: labour, conversion, music, and healing. Anthropologists who are familiar with the wide array of ethnographic literature focused specifically on even one of these four themes might contend that combining so many themes into one single chapter is, at best, overambitious. However, I am not purporting to conduct here a thorough anthropological analysis of all or any of these themes; more modestly, I consider them together as distinctive features which are symptomatic and indicative of the wider socio-religious disjunctures contained in the SoE and highlighted in the previous paragraph. It is these underlying broader disjunctures themselves—not the specific expressions of difference—that I wish to highlight here. But, first, it is important to provide some contextual background information regarding the macrocosmic socio-political influences that led to, and were correlated with, the development of the SoE as a microcosm.

## 4.2. CONTEXTUALISING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOE WITHIN ITS SOCIO-POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

According to the recollections of the former Acharya R.S. Verma, who was the Resident Acharya at STA during 1989-2009, the inspiration and impetus for the SoE originated with the former Chief Acharya Bishop Mathews—Jones’s son-in-law whom Jones appointed as the chief Acharya of STA when Jones stepped down in 1971. Acharya Verma recounted to me the manner in which he was approached by Acharya Mathews in 1991.



[Acharya Mathews] asked me, “Brother Verma, will you start this school of evangelism?” He provided a little money—approximately \$1000 USD—and it was a challenge for me, and so I approached some organisations who could join with me. [Others] started sending their evangelists, and in this way the financial burden was shared. In the beginning it was a 3-month programme, [and] the programme was designed for voluntary gospel ministry rather than being something that is job oriented. The gospel ministry was our focus. [...] And ever since we started, the SoE is going on—without any break. Without any break at all! I travelled to Kerala, to Bihar, to Rajasthan, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, all over [to recruit students], and during my period [as resident Acharya], more than 500 students came from over 14 provinces! ... And those students are now working in different ways. Some are freelance evangelists. Some have joined some organisations. Some 5-6 evangelists are working under a Methodist church. Every year students are coming.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to narrating the story of founding the SoE, in the same conversation Acharya Verma further pointed out that, leading up to the formation of the SoE, there had been a steady decrease in the number of individuals who showed interest in coming to STA to participate in the other programmes offered there. He recalled trying to start a programme called *Adhyatmik Paricharcha* (which he described as “a spiritual dialogue for Hindu people”) in 1989, but in spite of advertising it widely across a number of different cities, only five or six individuals came to participate. And, even before Acharya Verma was appointed as the Acharya in September 1989, his predecessor Acharya Titus had experienced similar difficulties with holding a captive audience for the *satsangs* (truth-gatherings) he had tried to implement around 1980. Eventually, Acharya Titus ceased his *satsangs* completely due to a lack of participation, and he consequently advised Acharya Verma against starting his own *satsangs*, speculating that there would not be enough interested audiences to sustain them.

These points were mentioned only briefly by Acharya Verma, and were offered as a sort of tangential evidence in support of his main view: that other Acharyas were not sufficiently gifted to maintain the same size or style of audience that Jones had seemed to attract effortlessly. As one of the many avid supporters of Jones and of STA, Acharya Verma was not alone in attributing the decline of interest in STA to the loss of Jones as STA’s Acharya. Many long-term ashramites of STA speculated that some of the most significant socioreligious changes over the last few decades—especially the decreasing interest in inter-religious dialogues at the round table conferences and the dwindling number of non-Christians, as well

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<sup>5</sup> Author’s interview with former Acharya Verma. Sat Tal Christian ashram, September 2016.

as Christians, who sought out STA for the spiritual environment offered through its programmes—were instigated by the loss of Jones, first, as STA’s official leader in 1971 and, second, at his death in 1973. Such individuals spoke of Jones as having proverbially left behind shoes that were too big for any other Acharya to fill: Acharya Verma called him a “spiritual giant,” and others like Acharya Ghosh, Auntie Eileen and Lillian Wallace referred to him with similar descriptions, suggesting that he possessed a quality and depth of charisma which could not be matched by subsequent generations of leaders.

Although it is true that Jones possessed a certain knack for drawing people together, I contend that the significant shifts in the general climate of interreligious relations in India since the inauguration of STA in 1930, and during the subsequent years that Jones spent as the spiritual leader of the ashram, are equally important. Consequently, when exploring both the general decline of active interest in the programmes offered at STA and the development of the SoE, there are two vital factors which must be considered simultaneously. On one level—which focuses microcosmically on STA with a sort of tunnel vision—there is indeed the loss of a truly charismatic and talented spiritual leader who was replaced by generations of leaders who, while immensely passionate and well-intentioned, did not seem to be able to match Jones’s charisma. STA can therefore be understood in Weberian terms to have encountered its steady, and seemingly irrevocable, decline as a direct result of the shift in leadership and the subsequent loss of charisma.<sup>6</sup> While Jones’s charisma might have been, to use Weber’s expression, “characteristically *unstable*”<sup>7</sup> inasmuch as its supposed stability and power rested on the inevitably finite existence of a single, fallible human person, it allowed the ashram to grow and flourish—that is, until Jones ceased his leadership.<sup>8</sup> And yet, on another more macrocosmic level—one which recognises the wider contexts within which STA inevitably operates—there were various socio-political changes in India during the decades leading up to 1990 that indirectly affected the operations of STA; more specifically, the Christian-Hindu (that is, Christian-Brahmin) interreligious relations that Jones had envisioned would flourish at STA were generally suffering from a decline in interest. Therefore, it seems plausible to me that, even if Jones had been able to continue indefinitely as the spiritual leader of STA, the

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<sup>6</sup> Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*, 358–72.

<sup>7</sup> Weber, *Selections in Translation*, 229.

<sup>8</sup> This challenging transition affiliated with the loss of an original guru, and the consequent loss of charisma has also been noted to be a real and pressing issue in Hindu contexts. See Orianne Aymard, *When a Goddess Dies: Worshipping Ma Anandamayi after Her Death* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), especially Chapter 3 and the Conclusion.

shifting socio-political environments of northern India more broadly would have overtaken him, and created hurdles, or even impassable barricades, that would have undoubtedly complicated his efforts to maintain the spiritual environment that he so actively strove to create. To understand the reasons for the development of the SoE, therefore, we must hold together both of these micro and macro lenses in tandem.

#### 4.2.1. *Hindu Nationalism and Critiques of Inculturation*

Picking up a point we first encountered in Chapter 2 (Section 2.1) let us therefore study some of these socio-political contexts which influenced, however indirectly, individuals' receptivity to, and interest in, a Christian ashram and the various inculturated expressions of Christianity that STA sought to embody, enact, and impart. Shortly following the establishment of STA in 1930, a number of different princely states in British India began to pass legal acts which prohibited conversion in their provinces. Thus, the Raigarh State Conversion Act (1936) mandated that any individual who was interested in converting had to first submit an application to the designated officials.<sup>9</sup> Other states began to enact their own anti-conversion legislation even before political Independence (1947), including Patna's Freedom of Religion Act (1942), Sarguja's State Apostasy Act (1945), and Udaipur's Anti-Conversion Act (1946).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Gandhi (who, we recall from Chapter 3 (Section 3.1.3), had crucially influenced Jones's desire to establish a Christian ashram and had expressed a somewhat lenient opinion of conversion during his meeting with Jones in 1917) was becoming increasingly articulate in the 1940s about his concerns regarding conversion to Christianity in India. By the 1940s Gandhi was asserting that conversion should not be pursued or enacted—not the least because, he argued, Christianity offered no spiritual worth that Hinduism did not also offer.<sup>11</sup> According to Gandhi, conversion was an unwise attempt to change an “integral part of one's self”<sup>12</sup> and might lead to physical violence.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, after the assassination of Gandhi and following India's Independence from Britain in 1947, the states of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh enacted anti-conversion legislations in 1967 and 1978 respectively, which re-enforced and strengthened the impact of the similar laws that had been initiated elsewhere in the 1930s and the 1940s.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jenkins, “Legal Limits on Religious Conversion in India,” 114.

<sup>10</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity*, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, 234.

<sup>12</sup> Gandhi, *The Collected Words of Mahatma Gandhi*, 62: 37.

<sup>13</sup> Gandhi, 64:99.

<sup>14</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity*, 4.

Furthermore, a number of organisations were formed which Chad Bauman has recently described as being “spawned” by the right-wing Indian nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (“National Volunteer Organisation,” known more commonly as RSS), including the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA) in 1952, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in 1964, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980, and the Bajrang Dal in 1984.<sup>15</sup>

I consider these above-mentioned post-Independence legislations and organisations as the beginnings of a third-wave of Hindu nationalism. According to Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, Hindu nationalism emerged as an active presence in late colonial India towards the end of the nineteenth century—manifested largely in the form of cow protection movements, mostly in UP and the Punjab—which we can consider as the first wave of Hindu nationalism where certain sociocultural markers of Hindu identity were foregrounded.<sup>16</sup> As I indicated in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.5), a second wave of Hindu nationalism emerged in the 1920s which sought to reclaim and reinstitute the Hindu essence (*hindutva*) of the subcontinent, and these have since been referred to as the “Hindutva” movement. These later offshoots of the RSS—beginning in 1952, rapidly gaining momentum in the mid-1980s, and continuing into the present—seem to be a part of what Metcalf and Metcalf refer to as the “re-organization” of the Hindu right, which sought to regain the public support that it had effectively lost in the late 1940s, after the assassination of Gandhi.<sup>17</sup> Further, we can recall from our discussion in Chapter 2 (Section 2.1) that, in the decades leading up to the inauguration of the SoE, there was also, especially amongst some nationalist Hindus, an increase of public criticisms of the character and the motives of those Christians who sought to practise different forms of inculturated Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.2.2. *Increased Public Visibility of Dalits*

In addition to the formation of several organisations which supported, in varying degrees, the promotion and the execution of Hindu nationalist ideologies, there were also significant changes in the political and socio-economic environments in India during the 1960s and the 1970s—these have been explored in great detail by Diego Maiorano.<sup>19</sup> Crucially,

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<sup>15</sup> Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Metcalf and Metcalf, *A Concise History of India*, 224.

<sup>17</sup> Metcalf and Metcalf, 225.

<sup>18</sup> Goel, *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or Swindlers?*

<sup>19</sup> Maiorano, “Indian Politics and Society in the 1970s.”

Maiorano argues that during these two decades a number of rural and relatively impoverished Indians (who collectively formed a substantial proportion of the population) began to place significant demands and pressures on the leading politicians. Such pressures had the political road paved for them by important figures like B.R. Ambedkar, who was India's first Law Minister and who had actively fought for the civil liberties and the political rights of India's untouchables (today usually designated as Dalits) since 1927.<sup>20</sup> These increasingly vocal demands of Indians from the lower socioeconomic backgrounds led to an increased political focus on national economic goals such as "abolishing poverty," while also substantially raising public awareness regarding the needs, aspirations, desires, and rights of groups of Indians who had been historically oppressed for centuries.<sup>21</sup> And, importantly, these two decades also witnessed a significant growth in styles of Pentecostal faith both internationally and also in India specifically<sup>22</sup>, as Pentecostal denominations began to emerge alongside (and sometimes replace) older establishments of Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity in India.<sup>23</sup>

I outline these various socio-political shifts of the 1940s-1980s as some of the macro contributing factors to the decline of attendance at the micro-site of STA since Jones stepped down from leadership, and also to the general decline in interest in the inculturated expressions of religiosity that STA offered, as detailed to me by Acharya Verma. Offering more historical basis to my argument, the declining attendance was not unique to STA; various other Christian ashrams that existed in India during those decades also experienced a similar decline, making it difficult to argue that STA's decline was entirely due to the loss of Jones alone as their charismatic leader.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, I submit, it was not *just* the loss of Jones as the spiritual leader that was responsible for the declining interest; there were several other factors which were far beyond the direct sphere of influence of the STA leadership. It was in this context of a general decline of interest—punctuated by public accusations against Christian conversion as well as a growing public awareness of the aspirations and visions of individuals from the lower castes—that STA developed a programme aimed at attracting a different kind of audience.

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<sup>20</sup> Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste*, 145.

<sup>21</sup> Maiorano, "Indian Politics and Society in the 1970s."

<sup>22</sup> Samuel, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements," 259.

<sup>23</sup> Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Cornille, writing at more or less the same time that STA began to develop the SoE programme in 1991, documents the steady decrease of attendance at Catholic ashrams between 1960-1990. Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism*, 141-46.

And, indeed, echoing the words of the former Acharya Verma, “every year students are coming” to the SoE.

During my fieldwork in 2016, twenty-six students attended the SoE programme, bringing it almost to its full capacity. A large group journeyed from Rajasthan, and others came from equally distant places like Varanasi, Agra, Delhi, and Ajmer, while some other students came from relatively nearby places like Moradabad, Haldwani, and Sat Tal’s neighbouring town of Bhimtal. These students did not know any of the others before coming to STA (the one exception being the two married couples) but they quickly became friendly amongst one another, and from the stories they told me about their upbringing, and by noting their professions and/or their fathers’ professions, I sensed that they shared a similar social status. And, importantly, almost all of them had grown up in Hindu families, so that they can be classified as recent converts—a point that will become especially relevant in our discussion below. Some of these recent converts like Suhasini and Anil thus came to STA’s SoE programme to learn more about the basic tenets of Christianity. However, the Rajasthanis, whom I return to below, came on slightly different terms due to receiving financial sponsorship from churches in Delhi: individuals were selected to come each year by a village pastor. Accordingly, the Rajasthanis themselves were not always eager to be at STA, and though they respectfully attended the classes taught at the SoE, many of them instead longed to learn practical skills that they could employ in their villages—the most real-world of Christian skills, they explained, were related to healing (*changayi*). Indeed, many of the SoE students began their affiliation with Christianity and with Jesus after personally experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about a story of healing which had taken place in their village. In this way, healing of one kind or another played a fundamental role in the lives of many of the SoE students—especially, as we shall see, the group from Rajasthan.

### 4.3. DISJUNCTURES ON-THE-GROUND

Having now contextualised the development of the SoE within its broader socio-political contexts, I move to explore the four themes—labour, conversion, music, and healing—which collectively demonstrate two significant disjunctures that structure the SoE. Specifically, as I indicated, there are significant differences between (1) “the expected” Brahmanical-influenced Indians as envisioned by Jones and “the actual” individuals for whom Brahmanical Hindu philosophies and practices were neither relevant nor appealing, and (2) the viewpoints and/or practices of my fellow SoE students and of the leadership of STA. I

consciously avoid focusing on the actual teachings which were explicitly conveyed during the SoE's formal instruction periods. As the daily schedule suggests (see footnote #1 of this chapter), two structured lessons were held each day, and the lessons covered a range of topics including the history of Christianity, Old Testament, New Testament, Christian mysticism, Hinduism (and "speaking with Hindus," by which was often meant "Evangelising to Hindus"), Islam (and "speaking with Muslims," with a similar qualifier), among others. My disinclination to focus on the substantive content of these lessons is not because there is nothing interesting or relevant to say about them—on the contrary, much could be said!—but it is rather because many SoE students repeatedly expressed to me that they themselves were generally disinterested in the lessons, and did not find them useful for their daily lives. For example, my friend Suhasini, whom we first met at the beginning of Chapter 1 as she professed her boredom with the SoE classes, confided in me that she felt that the doctrinal and scriptural materials covered in the lessons seemed to add unnecessary layers of complication to a teaching which, she had felt, was rather simple; she was baffled and irritated that a clearer message, e.g. "Jesus loves you, and has saved you. Follow him," was not more central to the teachings. Suhasini herself embodies some of the highly personalist dimensions of the spiritual quest of the founder Jones, which we studied in Chapter 3. Adding further support to Suhasini's perspective, Uncle Pratyush once candidly told me that the bookish teaching material of the SoE classes are "of little use in the village"—the lessons that he and other evangelists needed to instead learn, he asserted, were more musical songs about Jesus and how to pray more confidently for healing. Of course, the students' clear disinterest in the lessons could in and of itself merit further exploration but, taking my lead from the SoE students, I will not focus on that motif here. The four themes I have selected to focus on—labour, conversion, music, and healing—are ones I chose after a careful revision of all of my fieldnotes related to the SoE, onto which I employed a thematic structure akin to grounded theory<sup>25</sup>; after considering my qualitative data, these four themes were, for me, undeniably present.

#### 4.3.1. *Shramdaan: The Spirituality versus the Materiality of Labour*

When we finished eating our meals, we washed our dishes in the washing area located around the corner from the dining hall. The washing area included a bin for food scraps, a cold-water sink for rinsing, and three steaming tubs of water for washing. We scrubbed our metal

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<sup>25</sup> Ralph, Birks, and Chapman, "The Methodological Dynamism of Grounded Theory."

dishes dutifully as hungry monkeys peered through and pawed away at the screened-off windows, looking longingly at the food scraps in the bin. But few individuals washed their receptacles as a solitary task; most of the SoE students spontaneously enacted a sort of assembly-line system in small groups of three or four. One person would perform the initial rinse in the sink, another would wash, a third would rinse again in the two rinsing buckets, and the last person would put the dishes on the drying racks. During this process of washing, rinsing, and putting away our dishes, we would chat and laugh with one another, and we sometimes even hummed a tune or sang. As an alternative to this assembly-line system, I also noticed that some SoE students participated in a sort of informal shared washing, and it was especially common amongst individuals who frequently sat together. Not unlike the “rounds-buying” culture that permeates the United Kingdom pub scene, this second style of shared washing (what we might call “rounds-washing”) relied on the fact that all the participating individuals would eventually take their turn as the washer and would consequently enjoy several turns of not-washing for each time that they had washed. I often saw certain individuals taking away one, two, or even three additional sets of dishes with them in order to wash; this allowed them to be able to sit back and relax for the next two or three meals, while someone else took away their dishes to wash.

To scholars unaccustomed to the minute details that ethnographic research often focuses on, these washing-up descriptions might seem uninterestingly trivial, but it is often the most mundane events which reveal highly significant aspects of social and cultural dynamics. Indeed, I submit that these two styles of washing—both of which revolve around an approach that is “communal” (in the literal sense of being shared amongst others within a *communitas* in Victor Turner’s sense, and not in the Indian sense which often connotes group territorialism and inter-group violence) rather than solitary—are worth focusing our attention on. The reason why the washing up is so noteworthy is that it is a stark contrast to both the envisioned ideals of STA (we can recall from Chapter 3 (Section 3.3.2) that Jones desired all individuals to participate in labour specifically as a spiritual discipline). This raises the question: why was there such a marked difference between the envisioned practice of solitary washing at STA (which a significant portion of the regular, and more fervent, ashramites would keenly follow—we can recall my exchange with Uncle William) and the ways that the SoE students did their washing up in a collaborative manner?



I speculate that the SoE students were not trying to “cheat the system” and actively dismiss Jones’s vision for spiritual transformation vis-à-vis labour; the SoE students did not consciously reject any deeper spiritual reasons for labour. Instead, I suggest that their non-participation in what Jones had conceptualised as a fundamental aspect of spiritual life at STA was much more of a passive rejection—indeed, many students seemed unaware that there was anything that they were rejecting in not pursuing the trajectory of solitary washing as an outer expression of an inner spiritual practice. In contrast to many of the regular ashramites who came to STA outside of the SoE programme, physical labour in and of itself at the SoE offered no significant “rupture” from these students’ regular life, nor did it offer them a means through which they could prove that they did not view labour as something that should be exclusively relegated to individuals from a lower-caste—they *were* from lower castes, and labour was thus already a commonplace activity in their daily schedules outside of STA. Many of the men from Rajasthan, for example, worked as day labourers and thus regularly performed physically-taxing manual labour.

The same disinterest towards investing labour with any spiritual significance was also evident in the hour-long morning work period (*shramdaan*) which we already encountered in Chapter 3. Much like the washing of individual dishes, some of the tasks assigned during the work period were ones which would have otherwise required the care of paid labourers (e.g. cleaning toilets, cutting vegetables, watering the many potted plants and herbs around the main building) but other tasks seemed less necessary (e.g. sweeping the fallen leaves or pine needles from various parts of the forest into piles, only to have them blown away by the wind and, then, to sweep them again the next day—a truly Sisyphean labour!) and were perhaps allocated simply for the purpose of ensuring that everyone participated in some mode of labour. In the case of these acts of labour which seemed to be unnecessary from a strict task-completion perspective, it was not uncommon for the students—especially the ones from Rajasthan—to slip away from the group and instead go on a walk, take a nap, or hand-wash some of their clothes. It is clear, then, that labour was not conceptualised by the SoE students in the same ways in which we encountered it in Chapter 3; indeed, it was *not* seen by the SoE students as a physical practice which was imbued with spiritual meaning and transformative power.<sup>26</sup> Instead, they conceptualised labour as a practical necessity and a mundane task; it was an everyday chore which required completion and, as such, which could be done with varying

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander, “Ritual and Current Studies of Ritual: Overview,” 139.

degrees of efficiency. Cooperation—either through assembly-line teamwork or through taking turns with the washing—was largely a practical means of speeding up the process, and thus the act of labour in general did not serve the spiritual purpose that Jones had imagined it would; “the envisioned” and “the actual,” in other words, were drastically different.

#### 4.3.2. *Conversion: Motivations for, and Hesitations of, Following Jesus*

One morning following *dhyan*, Suhasini told me that the morning’s scriptural passage contained some verses which she did not like and had questions about. I looked at Suhasini, made a fierce sword-chopping motion with my hands, and in Hindi I asked, “The verse that says Jesus will not bring peace, but will do this [gesturing with the motion] to families? Is it that verse that you didn’t like?” She nodded, looking distressed, and replied anxiously, “Peace will not be brought? This is Jesus’ teaching? This is Christianity? No, no, I am not satisfied with this. I am not satisfied...”

“Suhasini,” I started, “I think these are very difficult verses. And I will tell you that I too do not like them. Because I think God should bring peace, isn’t it right? But there is more to be understood about these verses. They have a—” Here I hesitated, unable to explain “broader cultural and literary context” in my limited Hindi. “Wait. Let’s ask the Acharya.” We tracked down Acharya Ghosh on the verandah of the main building, where he was sipping a cup of chai. After we greeted him, I smiled and told him that Suhasini and I had a question about some verses from *dhyan* that we did not like. He looked at me, bewildered, perhaps thinking that I was mixing up my Hindi vocabulary. “You do not *like* them or you do not *understand* them?” He clarified in English. “Perhaps it is both!” I replied, “We do not understand them fully but what we understand we do not like.” I opened up my Bible and read him the verse: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”<sup>27</sup>

Acharya Ghosh asked me what I understood those verses to mean, and I rattled off how, during my high school years of avid church attendance and again in my undergraduate years of Biblical Studies, I had received various teachings about some of the nuances within ancient

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 10:34

Greek rhetoric regarding concepts like love and hate: how “hate” is relative to how much one loves something else. In this understanding, when the Bible says that one’s own family would become one’s enemies, it is a matter of rhetorical priority—whom would you prioritize if you were forced to choose: your family *or* your God? Accordingly, I told Acharya Ghosh that I thought the passage means that our love for God should be so great that if it came to it, we must tear ourselves from our family rather than deny our faith, but that is not to say our families should not matter to us at all, or that we should not want to have good and healthy relationships with them. “Isn’t it so?” I asked in conclusion.

Acharya Ghosh had been nodding along while I was offering my explanation, but now he turned to Suhasini, “*Aur? Tumhara interpretation kya hai?*” (“And? What is your interpretation?”). Not having followed our English-language conversation, Suhasini replied, in Hindi, that she had absolutely no understanding regarding what the verse was about, and she asked him to provide her with one. He began to explain the passage to Suhasini, drawing examples from Suhasini’s and her husband Anil’s respective family members who are still Hindu—despite years having passed since Suhasini’s and Rohit’s conversions to Christianity. “Your families are not angry with you and Anil that you are both Christian,” Acharya Ghosh explained in a matter of fact tone, “but some Hindu families would be angry that you have converted. They would be very, very upset! And so, this verse speaks about choosing your priorities—whom do you love more: your family or Jesus? This verse says that it should be Jesus!” The Acharya was emphatic before drifting off in thought, “But, in your case, you do not have to choose—and this is a good thing...”

This dialogue between Suhasini and Acharya Ghosh compels us to examine some of the wider sociohistorical currents related to the vexed matter of conversion in India, which is vastly important to the SoE, not only because some of the teachings of the SoE focused on how to converse with individuals from Hindu or Muslim faith contexts with the hope of teaching them more about Christianity, but also because many of the students identified as recent converts themselves. As we have indicated in Chapter 2 (Section 2.1) conversion has been articulated by some Hindu figures as a culturally undesirable and even morally inappropriate action wherein certain individuals use their spheres of power and influence (e.g. access to education, medicine, or financial means) as a form of allurement to convert others—the culmination of this viewpoint can be seen in Swami Dayananda Saraswati’s claim that

conversion is an act of violence.<sup>28</sup> Gandhi also furthered some Indians' suspicions that conversion was simply a fraudulent and unethical practice conducted by opportunistic Christians by arguing that Dalits and other uneducated individuals who converted had "no mind" and "no intelligence" with which to grasp the spiritual significance of their conversion but who were instead supposedly driven by socio-economic impulses.<sup>29</sup>

These controversies surrounding whether conversion is an ethically acceptable practice have been considered through different analytical lenses. According to one standpoint, conversion debates between Hindu and Christian communities are often "rooted not only in divergent analyses of the historical material on conversions but also in competing theological truth-claims about the nature of the ultimate reality and the human possibility of attaining this reality."<sup>30</sup> Some of these multiple ways through which conversion can be considered are highlighted by Rowena Robinson in her broader analyses of Hindu-Christian relations in 16<sup>th</sup> century Goa.<sup>31</sup> The majority of scholars considered by Robinson wrote between 1935-1960, but these debates continue in the present. Some recent scholars have focused more on the theological worldviews presented by different communities and religious traditions, and have explored the ways that individuals, either through implicit or explicit coercion or entirely through their own motivations, have altered their cosmological viewpoints from their formerly-held tradition to their newly-held one. For such scholars, conversion is considered primarily as a theologically-motivated change that happens internally in the mind of the individual.<sup>32</sup> Approaching conversion through a different analytical lens, other scholars have instead primarily examined the social, political, and other external motivations for conversion.<sup>33</sup> Of course, it goes without saying that these "internal" motivations and "external" pressures that lead an individual or group to convert from one tradition to another cannot be neatly or fully isolated from each other; both the internal and the external dimensions interweave, sometimes seamlessly, in an individual's life story—indeed, we see this inseparability of internal and external factors in some ethnographic literature.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, it is a helpful analytical tool to conceptualise these "internal" and "external" factors of conversion as conceptually distinct, not

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<sup>28</sup> Bauman, "The Violence of Conversion"; Rambachan, "Conversion from a Hindu Perspective: Controversies, Challenges, and Opportunities."

<sup>29</sup> Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Barua, *Debating Conversion*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Robinson, "Sixteenth Century Conversions to Christianity in Goa," 303.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Barua, *Debating Conversion*.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*.

<sup>34</sup> Roberts, *To Be Cared For*.

only to aid our scholarly discussion of the ethnographic materials we present here, but also because it seems that Jones himself possessed a rather dichotomous understanding of these two factors.

As we saw in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2.5), when Jones spoke and wrote about “conversion” he occupied himself primarily (albeit not exclusively) with what he called “vertical conversion”—an inward movement which he conceptualised as becoming more spiritually aligned with the teachings of, and more devoted to the person of, Jesus Christ. In fact, he went to great efforts to distinguish between (inner) conversion and (outer) proselytization. Thus, in his book aptly entitled *Conversion* (published posthumously in 1997), Jones clearly asserted, “We have seen that conversion is not to be confounded with proselytism which Jesus repudiated, for proselytism is the changing from one group to another group without any necessary change in character and life.”<sup>35</sup> Such mere proselytization, Jones emphasised, held the risk of being “a perversion—a using of the church as a means to one’s own ends, those of gaining social recognition.”<sup>36</sup> In this vein, referring to his own life-story and detailing the various stages of his conversion, Jones wrote: “I [initially] underwent a half-conversion...my label had been changed but not my life. I had been horizontally converted but not vertically.”<sup>37</sup> For Jones, his own “half-conversion” had come about through his regular attendance of a Christian church, thereby being part of a community of Christians and, in turn, taking on the social-institutional “label” of a Christian. But all this business of religious identification and self-labelling through being part of a community, Jones argues, falls under the realm of “horizontal” conversion, and still falls short of the deeper self-transformation that is intrinsic to, and expected of, “vertical” conversion. This “vertical” conversion was the ultimate goal; whereas “horizontal” conversion might *either* deter individuals from *or* help them to realise this goal, and thus by being so unpredictable, it should be less a focal point of one’s quest than the spiritual ascent through a “vertical” conversion.

Indeed, Jones occupied a puzzling, if not seemingly paradoxical, position in his view of whether “horizontal” conversion was at all a favourable moment in spiritual life. We can look at Jones’s relationship with Gandhi as an example: Jones often affirmed that Gandhi (who never self-identified as a Christian) “manifest[ed] a Christian spirit far beyond most of the rest

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<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Conversion*, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Jones, 36.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, 38.

of us.”<sup>38</sup> This sentiment seems to suggest that for Jones being Christian was more integrally related to one’s inward state (“vertical” conversion) than to one’s outward identity affiliation as a social category (“horizontal” conversion).<sup>39</sup> At the same time, however, Jones did long for Gandhi to identify as a Christian by avowing his personal commitment to Christ as Lord and saviour. Thus, in a letter to Gandhi, Jones wrote, “I thought you had grasped the center of the Christian faith, but I’m afraid I must change my mind. I think you have grasped certain principles of the Christian faith which have molded you and have helped make you great—you have grasped the principles, but you have missed the Person.”<sup>40</sup> To return to a central theme in Chapter 3, for Jones, truly knowing “the Person”—that is, the soteriological Christ who ultimately saves—and not remaining at the penultimate threshold of doctrinal “principles” would be best facilitated through indwelling Christian communities and maintaining Christian identifications; Jones lamented the fact that Gandhi never did outwardly identify as a Christian, speculating that “much of the blame [for Gandhi’s lack of “horizontal” conversion] must fall on us as missionaries.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, as I understand Jones, “horizontal” conversion was conceived, soteriologically speaking, as less vital and less transformative than the crucial moment of “vertical” conversion, but it still could be a pedagogical tool which could be used to prepare, verify, magnify, sustain, and strengthen one’s own “vertical” conversion. For this reason, much like any other event or process that Jones interpreted as a positive movement “toward Christ,” Jones welcomed “horizontal” conversion too as functionally valuable.<sup>42</sup>

However, born into low-caste Hindu families, many students of the SoE were confronted with certain realities of “horizontal” conversion that Jones had not anticipated—or, at least, had not squarely addressed in his writings. As we shall see below (Section 4.3.4), some SoE participants spoke of being beaten up and/or socially ostracised on account of their newly developed affiliation with Christianity. Such acts of violence directed at Indian Christians is, as Chad Bauman’s recent monograph has extensively demonstrated, “disproportionately” directed at individuals from lower castes.<sup>43</sup> In addition to describing the ways that they were sometimes violently targeted due to their Christian practices, some SoE participants

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<sup>38</sup> Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, Gandhi himself seems to have defended what Jones terms “vertical” conversion. Thus, Gandhi wrote to Reverend B.W. Tucker in 1928: “I do not want you to become a Hindu. But I do want you to become a better Christian by absorbing all that may be good in Hinduism and that you may not find in the same measure or not at all in the Christian teaching.” Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 37:224.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, 68.

<sup>42</sup> See also Martin, “Missionary of the Indian Road,” 150.

<sup>43</sup> Bauman, *Pentecostals*.

furthermore voiced their concerns about how baptism and any official declaration of Christian identity might affect their children's access to education quotas reserved for Hindus from low-caste backgrounds. In India, a certain number of educational reservations and job quotas are set aside—albeit not without controversy<sup>44</sup>—for Dalits due to the state's recognition that their social and financial status, shaped by historical injustices, is likely to have impeded their ability to pay for their children's school or to secure an administrative job themselves; however, if a Dalit officially converts to Christianity they cannot often access these quotas.<sup>45</sup> Against this sociopolitical backdrop, it is crucial to note that baptism, for Jones, was not a necessary part of Christian identity and he even allowed unbaptised individuals (whom he referred to, in the descriptive term coined by his contemporary Kandiswamy Chetti, as “informal Christians”) to fully participate in Christian activities—including the simple Communion held at STA each Sunday.<sup>46</sup> Though he did at times baptise individuals at STA, he did not view baptism as essential for salvation which is only possible through a “vertical” *conversion* to Christ.

If we keep in mind Jones's own understandings of “vertical” conversion as soteriologically superior to “horizontal” conversion, and, at the same time, recall his desire for “horizontal” conversion to still occur, we can explore how the lived out realities of the SoE students compare to Jones's envisioned desire. At this point it is important for us to recall that, for Jones, Hinduism was epitomised by Advaita Vedanta philosophy and expressed through certain Brahmanical cultural idioms. Thus, for Jones, individuals could conceivably convert “vertically” while still holding on to their previous social identities—that is, so long as they did not get in the way of deepening their newfound relationship with Jesus; Jones found both Pandita Ramabai and Sadhu Sundar Singh to be exemplary models of this “naturalization” (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.3). Yet, for many students of the SoE, the moment they officially assume a Christian identity they are forced to contend with both social and legislative losses through forsaking their access to certain quotas.

This returns us to the conversation between Suhasini and Acharya Ghosh regarding the biblical passage in Matthew that Suhasini (along with myself) “did not like.” Contained in the subtext of the Acharya's explanation to Suhasini regarding Hindu families who adamantly opposed conversion to Christianity was the question “if one had to choose between any worldly thing, or Jesus, which should they choose?” The answer for Acharya Ghosh, unequivocally,

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<sup>44</sup> Jaoul, “Le point de vue.”

<sup>45</sup> Soni, “Political Quotas, NGO Initiatives and Dalits' Human Rights in Rural India”; Massey, *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*.

<sup>46</sup> Martin, “Missionary of the Indian Road,” 144.

was “Jesus.” Whether one was asked to choose between Jesus *or* one’s Hindu family, or whether one was—as was the case for several of the students of the SoE—forced to choose between identifying as a Christian *or* maintaining one’s legislative access to educational quotas and job quotas<sup>47</sup>, Acharya Ghosh’s answer was consistently to choose Jesus and Christianity. Indeed, when some of the men from Rajasthan expressed their concerns about losing their educational quotas, Acharya Ghosh candidly informed them of his own reliance on God’s provision throughout his life choices, including accepting a lesser salary so as to be able to continue doing what he felt was God’s work. “Jesus,” he once quipped, referencing a biblical passage that we had meditated on in a morning *dhyan* ‘should always be chosen first. Seek ye *first* the Kingdom of God.’”<sup>48</sup> Though I did not hear Acharya Ghosh or any of the teachers actively distinguish between “horizontal” and “vertical” conversion *à la* Jones, they seemed to view “horizontal” conversion just as, if not more, important than “vertical” conversion. While Jones seemed to conceptualise “horizontal” conversion as a natural and desirable outcome of “vertical” conversion (e.g. in the case of Gandhi, it was only after sensing Gandhi’s personal transformation so that Gandhi had become, in Jones’s vision, a Christ-like individual that Jones began to actively hope for Gandhi also to self-identify as Christian), the teachers of the SoE seemed to conceptualise the inverse: “horizontal” conversion was a necessary precursor to “vertical” conversion, since it was “horizontal” conversion which would ensure that correct doctrine was being taught which could, in turn, enable the self to be transformed. This theme, as we shall see when discussing the life-story of Vihaan, was a point of significant disagreement between the SoE teachers and students.

#### 4.3.3. *Music: Christian Worship and Learning to Clap On Beat*

One day during our afternoon lesson, Mr. Stanley Das abruptly paused his lecture and began to discuss something which, from his manner and tone, seemed to have caused him immense unease for quite some time. Standing at the front of the classroom, he let his gaze wander around the room, making eye contact with several of the men from Rajasthan. “The music at the evening fellowship hour is not good. You are not clapping correctly. You are all just clapping whenever you choose, and no one is following the rhythm. One claps here, another claps here, a third gives two claps close together—it is not good at all. Maybe in [Hindu] temples (*mandir*) it is fine to do that, but we are singing Christian hymns...” He went on to

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<sup>47</sup> Jaoul, “Le point de vue.”

<sup>48</sup> Matthew 6:33



explain, in an animated way, the practice of clapping on beat to the dominant rhythm and proceeded to spend about five minutes demonstrating to the class how to clap along to a single beat. The entire class clapped with him, and a few of the men seemed to be holding back grins and laughter. When the spontaneous lesson in clapping had finished, Mr. Das returned to the topic of that day's lesson.

From one angle, this incident exemplifies one of the many ways that a leader can try to instill a shared identity amongst a group through teaching or enforcing specific actions, or ritualised performances, which ultimately strengthen the identity of the group by reinforcing boundary lines which clearly dictate who is in and who is out of the group. The formation of group identity (or, we might more accurately say “the negotiation of group membership,” since anthropologists did not explicitly use the term “identity” until the late 1970s when A.L. Epstein<sup>49</sup> wrote about the formation of ethnic identity) is something that anthropologists have focused on in great detail in recent decades. However, I am primarily concerned here not with how the practice of clapping on beat could represent as well as reinforce a shared identity, nor even more minutely with how the very action of forming one cohesive and united sound might unite the group. (Though those who are familiar with chanting and other practices focused on monophonic music could weigh in about the way that this style of clapping, too, enhances the cohesiveness of a group.) Rather, I am focusing on a different angle of Mr. Das's effort to make the group clap correctly: effectively, he was teaching them how to correctly enact *Christian* worship. Implicit in his explanation was the idea that there was a correct standard of Christian worship from which the SoE students were deviating. More specifically, he presented the idea that the way to correctly worship Jesus was to do so in an orderly fashion, and he directly contrasted this style of worship with the unregulated manner of worship that, he claimed, occurs in Hindu temples.

Even the use of the bells and the drum—instruments which the Rajasthani men had brought with them from their villages—during the fellowship hour was initially met with hesitation and reluctance by the STA leadership. The leaders, apart from this specific intervention by Mr. Das, usually tolerated the loud style of worship led by the Rajasthani villagers, but they rarely joined along in it. While the leaders and some of the students opted for music from the Methodist hymnals, or sang relatively newly-composed melodies from Western churches whose English lyrics had been translated into Hindi, the men from Rajasthan

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<sup>49</sup> Epstein, *Ethnos and Identity: Three Studies in Ethnicity*.

sang tunes which, they explained, had been sung in their local villages for generations. These songs were often in Bagri (the mother-tongue of the group from Rajasthan) though some of them were in standard Hindi. The melodies were monophonic and often followed a sort of call-and-response style, where the lead singer sings a line followed by the rest of the group who repeats the line after them. Drumbeats, bells, finger cymbals, and clapping reinforced the metric-feel pulse (most of the songs featured 1/8 and 2/16ths repeating percussive patterns with emphasis on the strong beats; almost all of them were wonderfully upbeat, featuring a metronomic pulse of 72-78.)<sup>50</sup> In less musicological terms, they are the kind of songs which readily prompt spontaneous foot-tapping, hip-swaying, and fist-pumping; “the Bagri Boys” (as I took to calling them in my fieldnotes) always sang them with full energy. Uncle Pratyush explained to me that one of the reasons why they used a call-and-response style of singing is that, often, the singing crowd would be a mix of literate and illiterate people; and illiterate individuals would not be able to follow along with a written text such as the hymnals used in many churches. The Rajasthani *bhajans* were a stark contrast to the hymns, and sometimes evoked giggles from the non-Rajasthani students who seemed unfamiliar with such triumphantly vigorous and upbeat tunes.

Often, immediately following the song, Acharya Ghosh would request a translation or explanation of the songs that were in Bagri—one was always dutifully provided, usually by Uncle Pratyush. Towards the end of the SoE programme, I also approached Uncle Pratyush and asked him to provide me with a Hindi translation of some of the Bagri *bhajans* that they had sung most frequently. With him dictating, we wrote out the lyrics of a handful of them. I present three of them here:

1. *Tayaari karo.* (Begin the preparations.)  
*Yeshu paas aane wale hai*<sup>51</sup> (Jesus is going to come)  
*Bhakti karo.* (Devote yourselves.)  
*Dua karo.* (Pray.)  
*Mahima karo.* (Glorify.)  
*Prashansa karo.* (Praise.)  
*Prarthna karo.* (Pray.)  
*Burai chodo.* (Shun wrong deeds.)  
*Bible padho.* (Study the Bible.)<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> With gratitude to my father, John Pohran, who listened to some of the audio recordings I collected of the Bagri *bhajans* and used his training as a musician so as to help me understand and articulate their musical qualities.

<sup>51</sup> This line then re-appears after each of the following lines, acting as a refrain.

<sup>52</sup> After receiving this written translation from Uncle Pratyush, I have since gone back and listened carefully to the multiple audio recordings I have of this song—I cannot identify any point at which this particular exhortation “read the Bible” is sung. I wonder whether, by including this line, Uncle Pratyush was trying to assure outsiders

2. *Mai prarthna karke* (I pray) *teri raah dekh raha hoo tu*.<sup>53</sup> (and wait to see you)  
*Mai mahima karke* (I glorify)  
*Mai prashansa karke* (I praise)  
*Mai ghutna tekke* (I kneel)  
*Mai haat jodke* (I join my hands in prayer)  
*Mai dandavat karke* (I prostrate myself)  
*Mai sir jhukake* (I bow my head.)
3. *Yahova charwaha mera hai* (Jehovah is my shepherd.  
*Yahova bhakti karave* (Devote yourselves to Jehovah.)  
*Yahova paapan maaf aale* (Jehovah forgives all our sins.)  
*Yahova maanda me hadaare, langde, lulu, gunge* (Jehovah heals the ill among us:  
those who are crippled, lame, and dumb.)

These *bhajans*, which express worship to Jesus, contain some striking resonances with the more traditional *bhajans* from Hindu *bhakti* religious contexts such as those attributed to medieval poet-saints such as Tukaram, Mira, and Kabir. Specifically, the use of certain verbs, as well as the use of “*teri*” and “*tu*” so as to use the most informal of the three possible ways (*aap*, *tum*, and *tu*) to address another person in Hindi is seen in both the traditional *bhajans* and these ones in Bagri. This level of informality is comparable to the choice, in French, to “*tutoyer*” rather than “*vouvoyer*” someone, but it holds even more weight here since it is the Hindi “*tu*” (the most informal possible) rather than “*tum*” (used for a level of casual informality among friends) which is chosen here. To address God as “*tu*” conveys a deep sense of intimacy—comparable to that of lovers—where the use of formalities would seem amiss.

And yet, from my reading of them, these Bagri *bhajans* also contain distinctive features which, I think, can be better understood by considering them alongside some key themes articulated by Dalit liberation theology.<sup>54</sup> Such visions creatively use the local languages, mythic narratives, symbolic patterns, and cultural lifestyles of Dalits to express their experiences of being crushed, their hopes and agonies, and, most fundamentally, their faith in the living God who is with them in their suffering and who will liberate them from their bondage. There is much in these Bagri *bhajans* which strongly resonates—in every sense of the term—with these concerns of Dalit theology in which “pathos is the beginning of

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that the *bhajans* were indeed *pukka* (legitimate) Christian ones inasmuch as they encouraged specifically-Christian practices, i.e. the Christian practices which the SoE taught the students to value.

<sup>53</sup> This line, too, re-appears after each of the following lines, acting as a refrain.

<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere, I have written about *Christ Bhakti* and *bhajans* which are used to express devotion to Jesus in Indian contexts. Though these particular *bhajans* did not feature in my written work, the broader themes and context that I summarised therein play a key role in my interpretation of these *bhajans*. Pohran, “Christ-Centered Bhakti: A Literary and Ethnographic Study of Worship.”

knowledge,” for it is on the way of suffering that individuals come to know Christ who participates in their suffering.<sup>55</sup> Thus, in these *bhajans*, there is a clear focus on the anticipation of the return of Jesus as the healer of broken, diseased, and unhealed humanity. In the first *bhajan*, the line “Jesus is going to come” is repeated after each exhortation to an action. And, in the second *bhajan*, the line “I wait to see you” is repeated in the same manner. The majority of the lines, even those which are descriptive of the poet-speaker’s actions, can be read as prescriptive ways in which one should act in order to prepare for the coming of Jesus. These songs, then, are not descriptive in the same ways that some *bhakti bhajans* are—in which the poet-speaker often laments passionately about her seemingly unrequited love for her Lord<sup>56</sup>—but they are a fervent call to action and an assertion of God’s coming. The Bagri *bhajans* also contain, as demonstrated in the third song, declarations of the power of Jesus: Jesus is not only a remover of sins but also a physical healer who can cure all sorts of ailments.<sup>57</sup> One entire song (not provided here) was devoted to proclaiming the biblical story in which Lazarus was raised from the dead; Jesus’ ability to heal even the most severe of infirmities, and to restore good to all situations, was a recurring theme. We will return to this focus on healing in Section 4.3.4 of this chapter.

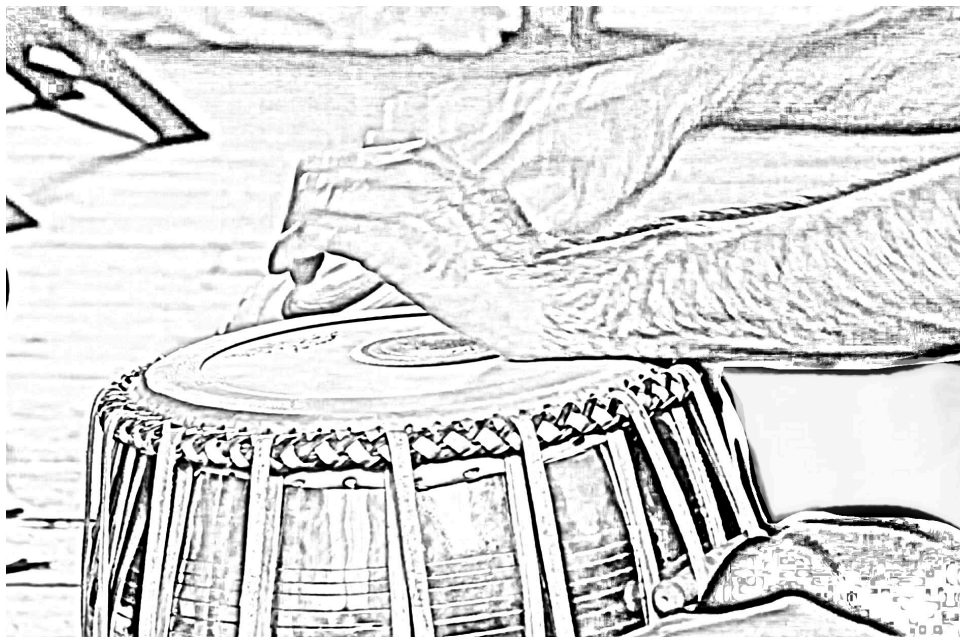


Figure 9: A Rajasthani student plays the tabla while singing a *bhajan*

<sup>55</sup> Stanislaus, *The Liberative Mission of the Church among Dalit Christians*, 183; Nirmal, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,” 227.

<sup>56</sup> Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*.

<sup>57</sup> We see this same trend to declare the power of Jesus in the *bhajans* sung by *Khrist Bhaktas* at *Matri Dham* ashram, who proclaim that salvation and peace are received through Jesus’ name. See San Chirico, “Khrist Bhaktas: Catholics and the Negotiation of Devotion,” 24.

Interestingly, when I asked Uncle Pratyush about who had composed the *bhajans*, he simply told me that the melodies themselves had already existed—he explained that the villagers had merely replaced a few of the words, and, of course, crucially added “Jesus” to the various refrains. He elaborated, “With these songs which use our local, tribal languages, we praise Jesus Christ and sing about his miracles, how the Lord Jesus gives vision to the blind, gives ears to the deaf, enables the lame to walk, and gives life to the dead. All of this we sing about so that we might give glory to the Heavenly Lord. We play various instruments like the drums, harmonium, guitar, cymbals and sing along and clap our hands while chanting God’s name. We praise and glorify God, and we can feel his presence when we sing; we become peaceful, healed and blessed.”<sup>58</sup> Uncle Pratyush also told me that these songs are more generally sung in the villages for a multitude of other purposes, including for entertainment or alongside any rituals or any cultural or traditional shows.<sup>59</sup>

I interpret these two details shared with me by Uncle Pratyush—the fact that (1) these particular *bhajans* had been created by infusing pre-existing ones with Christianised themes by simply altering the lyrics, and that (2) these same *bhajans* were then used in a variety of social and ecclesiastical settings—as examples which encapsulate and demonstrate the mutability and the malleability of religious devotional motifs as conceptualised by many of the SoE students. For them, the motifs were intrinsically flexible—hence Suhasini’s puzzlement and dissatisfaction over biblical passages that called for choosing Jesus *over* choosing one’s family—and it was also energetic; a proclamation and celebration of the miraculous deeds that God had done for the people of God. Reverence for God was not solemn or orderly in the manner of some regulated church services; it was largely an enthusiastic call to God where the joy of the singers spilled over and out of the vessels that tried to contain it.

But, if we recall this section’s opening vignette which described the teacher Mr. Das endeavouring to instill in the SoE students a particularly “right” way to worship by clapping

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<sup>58</sup> *Yeh geet humare adivasi bhasha—local logon ki bhasha hai. Isme Parmeshwar ki mahima ka bakhaandh kiya gaya hai aur saat me a Prabhu Yesu Masih ke chamatkari geet gaaya gaya hai. Prabhu Yesu Masih ne jaise andhon ko aakhein di, behron ko kaan diye langdon ko chalaaya, mare hue ko jilaayaa is prakaar se hum bhajan gaate hai jisse Parmeshwar ki mahima ho. Isme dholak saat me, kisiko harmonium bajane aaye toh harmonium saat me aur guitar bhi saat me us ilaaka me manjira wagherah aur tapli bhi bajate hai. Parmeshwar ke naam..haat taali wagherah..usko manjira bolte hai. Parmeshwar ki mahima karte hai. Jab hum gaana gaate hai aur Parmeshwar ki upasthithi ko mehsoos karte hai, aur hume shanti milti hai, changaai milti hai aur gaane ke dwara hume ashish milti hai aur Parmeshwar ki mahima hum is prakaar karte hai.*

<sup>59</sup> *Prabhu Yesu Masih ki mahima karneka hai... naach gaan hai, khel kud hai, reeti rivaj hai, jo bhi sanskrutik karekram hai, rivayak sambhandh hai).*

orderly, we note that a rather different view of worship was held by the SoE students and the teachers. Mr. Das's reference to this Hindu style of worship is particularly revealing of the fluid nature of *bhakti* that often criss-crosses Hindu-Christian binaries in rural and small-town India. Discussing one form of devotional songs which draw on materials from the Sanskrit Puranas and the epic narratives in the Radhavallabha tradition, Guy Beck notes that it involves an "intimate interaction between the lead singer and the responders," and is structured by the responsorial singers who repeat the lines of the principal singer (*mukhiya*). These participants assume the roles of Krishna and the cowherd women, and the musical performance progresses through their interactive "play," which is not simply a meditation on the eternal *Rasa-Lila* dance but a vicarious participation in its transcendental movements.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps reflecting some of these participatory motifs from their folk Hindu milieus, for the SoE students too, worship was indeed an expression of gratitude to God, but it was also itself a transformative act, as expressed by Uncle Pratyush's assertion that it is through singing the songs that they *become* "peaceful, healed, and blessed." And, as the attentive reader might have already noted, this entire process of worship was deeply grounded in the process of healing: songs could include either a vivid proclamation of the healing one had already received or a declaration about the healing power of God, and the act of singing itself had the potential to bring about healing in individuals. Thus, keeping this somatic focus of healing in mind, we turn to our fourth and final theme: testimonies of healing.

#### 4.3.4. *Healing, Faith, Knowledge (Changayi, Viswas, Gyan)*

After dinner and evening chai, we returned to the main building for the fellowship hour, during which we sang a selection of songs until eventually one person (selected in advance by the Acharya) shared his or her testimony. Terms like "the hope of glory" (*mahima ke asha*), "salvation" (*uddhar*), "healing" (*changayi*), "the kingdom of God the Heavenly Father" (*parameshwar ke raj*), "the Holy Spirit" (*pavitra aatma*), and "baptism of the spirit" (*agni baptisma*) were frequently invoked by those who shared their testimony and/or offered prayers following another's testimony.

The majority of the Rajasthanis, as well as a number of other students, began their testimonies by indicating that they used to operate within a strictly Hindu sphere of religious

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<sup>60</sup> Beck, "Song: Two Braj Bhāṣā Versions of the Rāsa-Līlā Pancādhyāyī and Their Musical Performance in Vaisnava Worship," 197.

belief and practice, but through their recent exposure to Christianity, they have begun to adhere to Christian practices. They started with phrases like “I was a Hindu” or “I come from a Hindu family,” and then proclaimed that, following a series of events, they or their entire family now possess faith in Christ. These personal testimonies, though they varied with respect to the exact details of their circumstances, followed a very similar pattern. When referring to the events and the circumstances which had brought about their transition from strictly Hindu beliefs and practices to specifically Christian ones, individuals spoke of having experienced disturbances and troubles (*pareshani*) in their family situations which placed great stress upon each of the family members. These *pareshani* included social dynamics such as alcoholic fathers who drank away the family’s finances (some of the men spoke of their own former alcohol and cigarette addictions) and domestic abuse, and some individuals also indicated that there had been suspicions of spirit (*bhut*) possessions which made them visit village folk healers (*Tantriks*) in search of relief and cures. A larger number of the individuals gave vivid accounts of combatting various illnesses and diseases—ranging from persistent headaches, to boils and lesions on the skin, to partial paralysis—and of struggling to make ends meet financially, where these difficulties had often materialised through scarcities of water and food for either their crops and livestock or their immediate family members. While these negative circumstances continued to plague the individuals and their then-Hindu families, there was often a nearby Christian pastor or devout family in the village who offered to pray for them and encouraged them to start joining the Christian gatherings so that they could also begin to pray to Jesus for themselves. Sometimes immediately upon receiving the consolation of prayer from others and sometimes only after starting to pray regularly for themselves, individuals declared that their *pareshani* and *bimari* (illnesses) were removed and they were given *changayi* (healing), which further increased their *viswas* (faith) in *Yesu Masih* (Jesus Christ). For this transformation, they offered their gratitude to God (often referring to God as *Prabhu* and sometimes as *Parmeshwar*), thanking God for bringing them *shanti* (peace) and improving their situation by providing for their needs. Some of the individuals had since received baptism (some referred to this rite of passage with the Hindi (and Hindu-inflected) term *diksha*, though most simply used the English word *baptism*) and, though the majority of the SoE group was not baptised, a few of them spoke specifically about having ceased their visits to the *Tantriks* after commencing Christian prayer.

What is particularly intriguing about these testimonies are the conceptions and the images of Christianity that are portrayed through them. To be sure, these individuals do

articulate some sense of a distinction between their Hindu pasts and their current Christian practices, but the precise activities and beliefs which demarcate (or not) their identity *either* as a Hindu *or* as a Christian do not always seem to suffice for the spiritual leaders of STA who demand more precisely drawn contours. As far as these leaders are concerned, many of the SoE students reside in an undesirably-ambiguous middle-ground of dangerous in-between liminality of Hindu and Christian. A conversational exchange between Acharya Ghosh and an 18-year old Rajasthani man, Vihaan, exemplifies the ways that the students of the SoE and these leaders held onto rather different understandings regarding precisely what the Christian faith consists of and looks like and, more specifically, whether Vihaan himself was to be viewed as someone in-between and, thus, not yet fully or properly Christian.

We can start with a brief summary of Vihaan's life-story, which he narrated to our group on the same night that prompted the conversation between him and Acharya Ghosh. Vihaan began his testimony by indicating that he had grown up in a Hindu family which had many *pareshani* and *bimari* and had no *shanti*. He spoke of experiencing persistent aches in his body and, in spite of the various treatments that he sought out, he never seemed to be able to recover from them. Further, Vihaan's family were cowherders, and a scarcity of water (they had dug two underground wells but both failed to produce a sufficient water supply) forced them to spend from their savings to buy tanks of water for the cattle; this expenditure had a drastic impact on the family's financial status. Knowing about the family's troubles with maintaining a sufficient water supply, a pastor offered to pray for Vihaan and invited him to join in Christian fellowship. Vihaan accepted the pastor's offer of prayer, joined the fellowship, and also invited his own family to come along with him. After praying to Jesus, the pastor instructed Vihaan's family to dig a third well in a place that he claimed God had told him would produce water, and—sure enough—this well produced an abundance of water, enabling the family to care for their cattle, share water with their neighbours, and even begin to grow some vegetables. Vihaan's family was delighted, and gave thanks to God for their newfound ability to save 10 INR/day (around 0.10 GBP). With their worldly problems resolved, the family stopped attending the Christian fellowship until Vihaan's elder brother fell seriously ill. The family tried to care for him at home, but when his condition continued to worsen, the family took him to the church in order to request the pastor to pray for his recovery. After the pastor's confident prayer to Jesus, Vihaan's brother began to recover quite rapidly; his recovery reinforced the family's faith in Jesus, and Vihaan proclaims that he has remained steadfast in his faith ever since. Following this testimony, which received ample applause and loud



vocalisations of “Hallelujah” from the rest of the group, Acharya Ghosh directed some questions at Vihaan.

Acharya Ghosh (AG) – “You said that you left and then came back into faith, what do you mean by coming into faith?”

Vihaan (V) – “By faith I mean that with prayer I was healed of my health issues, and this is the reason that we came into faith.”

AG – “Yes, what do you mean by you came into faith? What faith? What do you have faith in?”

V – “I mean faith in the Lord, after he healed us of something that I thought was impossible, and gave me peace.”

At this point, Uncle Pratyush (P) from Rajasthan jumped in to offer a modified explanation to the Acharya on behalf of Vihaan. And, moments later, Uncle Rahul (R), the pastor who had advised Vihaan’s family about the wells, himself joined in.

P – “[Vihaan] has not completely mentioned that he was discouraged to embrace Christianity by his family members, thus he was skeptical. And then again there was trouble, like his elder brother fell sick and then he finally was firm on his decision...”

AG – “But Vihaan, do you read the Bible? Have you read its entirety?”

V – “I haven’t yet read it completely.”

AG – “No?! You must read it, your faith will increase by hearing and reading God’s word, the more you read, the more you’ll understand (*samajh*) and your faith will become stronger (*tumhara viswas badhega*). Healing is only healing...it is important, of course—but knowledge of the Lord is very important. (*Changayi sirf changayi... zaruri hai—lekin Prabhu ka gyan bahut zaruri hai*).”

V – “Yes, I’m learning from my phone. I have a track which has the recording of the Bible so I can hear it in Hindi. I am uneducated but I can pray very well, just like my friend whom you heard praying yesterday. I am learning about the Bible even though I cannot read it. The Lord does really great work.”

AG – “Very good, very good. Son, I know there are lot of problems where you stay, and so healing is very important, and through this the Lord shows you faith but you must increase your knowledge (*gyan*) and wisdom (*buddhi*), through reading the Bible. For example, it’s said in the Bible that Jesus died for our sins...”

R (interrupting) – “Yes Sir, he’s a new addition, it’s not been very long, I’m helping him to learn. They had a lot of problems, especially with water, they had to call for tankers. When I went to his house, God led me to show him a place where he could get water in his house, and after that he is having no problem with water, after the prayer. There was enough water for the fields and even to give to others, that’s how their faith increased even more. That’s how the entire family came into faith, they are 8-10 of them. The bore ring well incident really increased our faith. God is great and where there is prayer God shows God’s power.”

This dialogue demonstrates a significant difference between the Acharya and Vihaan with regard to how they perceived what it meant to have Christian faith. For Vihaan, faith was the natural end result of both experiencing a physical healing and obtaining a practical provision which were attributed to the miraculous intervention of Jesus. Because Jesus provided and healed in a way that Vihaan had no other way to account for (and in a way that other *Tantriks* and Hindu deities had not accomplished), Vihaan was filled with faith in Jesus. Upon possessing this faith, Vihaan continued to express it through offering gratitude to God and maintaining a personal practice of prayer and *bhajan* singing within a context of Christian fellowship. When Vihaan spoke of his faith leaving him, he did not speak of any change of belief in the divine power of Jesus, he only indicated that he had stopped attending the Christian fellowship; i.e. that he had ceased his own practice of prayer and *bhajan* singing to Jesus. Given the ways that Vihaan spoke about his faith both during his testimony and during other conversations with me throughout his stay at the ashram, it might be helpful to think of his faith as the result of a sort of inferred confidence in God's abilities—i.e. faith was the consequent expression of gratitude through prayer and Christian fellowship. The starting point of Vihaan's faith was witnessing the power of Jesus, but this faith was given expression through *bhakti* and fellowship.

Meanwhile, for Acharya Ghosh, Christian faith was a virtue that could be developed and increased through gaining an awareness and understanding of the biblical accounts of Jesus specifically, and of the Christian scriptures more generally. To Acharya Ghosh, faith was a close companion of wisdom and knowledge. For him, the physical healing and the provision of material goods attributed to Jesus were adequate starting points to cause someone to gain an interest in the person of Jesus, but faith did not increase apart from a deep immersion in the Bible. In this understanding, faith was more directly linked with knowledge of the Lord (*prabhu ka gyan*) than with healing and the subsequent fellowship and *bhakti* that occurred amongst those who had received the healing. The Acharya's phrase "healing is only healing," is especially revealing of his standpoint that healing in and of itself is not a sufficient expression of, or justification for, one's Christian faith, even though he allows that "it is important, of course." In his ultimate analysis, however, Christian faith was to be grounded in an ever-increasing knowledge of God as revealed through the Christian scriptures.

These types of exchanges happened somewhat frequently following SoE students' testimonies. On a different night, after Uncle Pratyush had shared his testimony and given

further accounts of how he regularly preached about Jesus in the villages, Acharya Ghosh questioned him directly about the content of his preaching. Uncle Pratyush responded,

P – “I tell them that Jesus Christ is the forgiver of sins. I also say that if you have faith in him then the sick will be healed.”

AG – “But you must tell them that Jesus offers salvation (*mukti*)! Otherwise the person can walk away after hearing you, it can go to waste. The most important thing is to know that Jesus was crucified for our sins. For *my* sins. This is the most important [thing].”

P – “Yes, of course, but if I tell them that first then I could get beaten up!”

AG – “I mean to say that the salvific message of Jesus Christ should be delivered to them. This is the purpose of our preaching. And of our lives.”

P – “Yes, sir, when they have ailments (*pareshani*) they will come to Jesus. And slowly they realise that He is the one healing them.”

The fundamental disagreement between Uncle Pratyush and Acharya Ghosh with regard to what was “the most important” aspect of Christianity to share with others in the context of preaching is an echo of a debate which has long reverberated in theological and missiological circles. The distinction between these two viewpoints has been highlighted by F. Hrangkhuma as one between “mission from above” and “mission from below” among Protestant groups in India.<sup>61</sup> Another contrast that emerges from this disagreement between Acharya Ghosh who emphasizes Bible-study and Uncle Pratyush who highlights the worldly afflictions of his audiences is the classic distinction between the rational and the affective dimensions of the human person. We can phrase the question in this way: is devotion to Jesus a thing of the intellect or the emotion? Or, put alternately, is discipleship to Christ the result of first recognising oneself as a sinner in need of salvation, and then seeing Christ as the God who offers this salvation, or of witnessing first-hand Christ’s power and then choosing to devote oneself to Christ? As we have also seen in the student-teacher conversations at the SoE, this theological messiness continues to play out on the ethnographic terrain of STA, fractured by the two disjunctures that we have indicated above.

#### 4.4. CONCLUSION

The first half of this chapter explored some of the various social, historical, and political contexts of the decades leading up to the establishment of the SoE in 1992. Following that, we

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<sup>61</sup> For an overview, see Barua, *Debating Conversion*, 92.

have seen that there are significant differences between the type of Indianness that E. Stanley Jones envisioned when founding STA in 1930 and the realities of the SoE students in the present day. We also have seen a number of crucial differences between the ways that the SoE students and the SoE teachers conceptualise and live out their expressions of Christianity. By interweaving some macro transitions across northern India with certain micro shifts at the site of STA, we have highlighted the point that the agential capacities of individuals such as Acharya Ghosh, Vihaan, and Suhasini are ongoing negotiations which are transacted against this dense backdrop.<sup>62</sup>

In this vein, we might think of this chapter as having explored an “absence” of what was expected to occur at STA. Among the SoE students there was, after all, an “absence” of Brahmanical rituals, categories, and mentalities that Jones envisioned would have existed amongst STA’s visitors. This silent absence, ultimately, became its own form of active presence—in the way that the existentialist philosopher Sartre speaks of absence. Sartre describes an individual in a café who expects to see their friend Pierre but, not finding him, instead notices (or *sees*) the absence of Pierre. It is, Sartre argues, our expectation to see something (or someone) and then, not seeing it, that causes us to “experience” and “discover” the absence as “a real event.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, when we expect to see something—say, a group of Hindus and Christians all living a Brahmanically-inflected lifestyle together at an ashram—its very absence becomes a glaring presence that we cannot help but become aware of and focus our attention on. Across the four ethnographic moments of labour, conversion, music, and healing, we consistently noted an “absence” of Brahmanically structured or flavoured Hinduism. While this “absence” was most evident when exploring the temporal disjuncture between Jones’s envisioned ideals with the actual demographic realities of the SoE students, we also explored a second synchronic disjuncture: the ways that the teachers and the students of the SoE conceptualise, indwell, and enact Christianity. Consistently, we saw that the teachers and the students held somewhat differing views regarding which beliefs and actions were the most imperative to their Christian faiths.

Indeed, with varying levels of forthrightness, the teachers often attempted to correct the students’ understandings of what it meant to enact Christian faith. Reflecting back on our discussion in Chapter 3 regarding Stanley Jones’s “Ashram Ideals” in which he stated his desire for STA to be “truly Indian,” we can here add the question as a subtext: “*whose* Indianness?”

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<sup>62</sup> Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.

<sup>63</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 9–10.

Is the Indianness expressed by the students of the SoE—the sheer mundanity of labour, the sociopolitical anxieties relating to conversion, the passionate-albeit-offbeat worship music, and the healing-centered faith—a kind of Indianness which could be accepted (if not encouraged?) as a legitimate form of inculturated Christianity? Would it be “truly Indian”? And, on the topic of inculturated Christianity, what do we make of the fluidity of religious devotion and passionate proclamations of becoming healed on the part of the SoE students? Are such expressions “truly Christian”? I do not ask these seemingly rhetorical questions from a standpoint that claims to have arrived at a singular, tidy definition of that which can be “truly Indian” or “truly Christian.” Nor am I trying to argue, picking up on our discussion of Bauman and Fox in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2.2) that the SoE forms of Indianness align neatly with orthodox Christian theology—others in the fields of systematic theology and ecclesiology have passionately undertaken this enterprise,<sup>64</sup> but this is not my aim. Rather, I ask these questions with the phenomenological aim of understanding and articulating the socio-cultural influences that impact the atmosphere of STA. Indeed, especially through considering some of the ethnographic moments at the SoE organised under four themes, we have seen some of the ways that the ideals held by the teachers have direct pedagogical implications for the students, and for the environment at STA more broadly. We highlighted some of the *embodied* ways that the SoE students expressed their understandings of *Indian* and *Christian*—the foods they ate, the labour they performed (or avoided), the hymns they exuberantly sang; their emphasis on corporeal and holistic healing, etc.—and the ways this often differed from what the SoE teachers expected. As I explored in the previous chapter, Jones emphasised that the Christian faith must centre around a soteriological encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. However, as the spiritual leadership at STA passed through different Acharyas over the years, each Acharya brought along his own ideas and convictions concerning what it meant to live as a Christian. Thus, each in their own way, the Acharyas aimed to impart particular Christian values to the ashramites and to the SoE students. We have seen how these *social transitions* have played out within Christian environments at the SoE and, as Chapter 5 shall explore in more detail, the various Acharyas and their particular convictions concerning Christian doctrinal points, have also crucially shaped STA’s interactions with individuals from *non-Christian* religions.

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<sup>64</sup> Razu, “Towards a Critical Theology of Risk-Taking,” 354; Boff, “The Poor, the New Cosmology and Liberation,” 121–23.

# Chapter 5:

## THE NEGOTIATIONS OF BELONGING:

### RELATIONAL DYNAMICS OF WORLD AMRITA AND SAT TAL

#### CHRISTIAN ASHRAM

#### 5.1. INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, STA facilitates some of its own programmes including the Winter Ashram, Summer Ashram, and SoE—but in the remaining months (and sometimes also overlapping with these two-three months of STA programmes), STA frequently rents out its space to various groups who are keen to make use of the tranquil and scenic atmosphere for their own programmes and retreats. Many of these groups are indeed Christian groups who run their own Christian spiritual programs. But there are also various secular groups—such as physical education groups and school leadership camps—who hire the space. Some of these secular groups hail from Christian institutions, but groups from Hindu (or other) institutions are equally present—the religious affiliation of education or athletic-oriented groups is not of particular importance to STA. The staff at STA do not typically interact much with these visiting groups beyond ensuring that their physical needs (lodging, meal times, help with taxi arrangements, etc.) are met.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the ashram staff seem primarily concerned with how their group members behave on the ashram's grounds—do they place any unreasonable demands on the Hostess or servants of STA? Do they clean their dishes properly, and push in their benches after mealtimes, and are they otherwise orderly? Overall, spiritual guidance is kept to a minimum, because either (a) the group, as in the former case, is accompanied by Christian pastors who have formulated their own teaching material and worship practices—both of which are assumed to be compatible with STA's own spiritual teachings—or (b) the group, as in the second case, has not come for an explicitly spiritual purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017, STA started an initiative where the Acharya, or another representative of the ashram, gives a short talk to any visiting group. The talk varies, but is generally about the history of the ashram. I highlight Acharya Ghosh's talk to WA below.

However, there is one other group who, since 2003, has frequented STA on a near-annual basis. This group, which I will call World Amrita (WA), is the sole group, both present and past, that hires the ashram space in order to run its own spiritual programme *and* which is not *explicitly* Christian. This unique position that WA occupies in the contexts of STA has resulted in ample informal discussions among STA ashramites—along with more formalised discussions at the STA board meetings—on the topic of where precisely WA fits into STA’s spiritual landscape, including whether WA should be there at all. These ongoing debates amongst members of the wider STA community, especially recalling one of Jones’s original visions for STA to be a place where people from diverse faith backgrounds would all be welcome to share in spiritual community together (Chapter 3, Section 3.5), makes the study of the relational dynamics between STA and WA particularly fruitful for our present exploration. Thus, this chapter explores the social interactions and the relational boundaries between STA and WA from 2003-present. My goals are both descriptive and analytical: I present ethnographically-based phenomenological descriptions of these aspects of present-day life at STA, but I also explore the prolonged interactions and dense contestations between STA and WA as a case study that can help us understand some of the motivations and challenges of creating an interreligious spiritual community.

#### 5.1.1. *World Amrita*

WA is a small not-for-profit organisation whose founders’ expressed goal is to offer spiritual “awakening” to seekers. The teacher (one of WA’s two original founders) with whom I have extensively interacted over the course of my ethnographic research, and whom I will call Dana, draws from her experiences in a diverse range of spiritual and existential styles such as Christianity, Hinduism, Jin Shin Jyutsu, Body-Mind Centering, and her love of poetry and the outdoors. Dana herself is an American who grew up within Christian contexts, but she has lived in India (primarily in Lucknow) for several years both as a student of Hindu gurus and, since being authorised to give spiritual instruction (*dharma*) in 1998, as a spiritual teacher in her own right. The group facilitates silent meditation and “deep rest” retreats not only in India but also in Israel, Western Europe and North America; they first hosted one of their retreats at STA in 2003 and, barring the years during which they were not able to use the ashram space (I return to this point in Section 5.4.2), they have returned to STA on an annual basis, usually around March-April and for any duration from two weeks to one month. From an Indian perspective, WA’s participants are mostly “foreigners” though some Indians also participate in

the group. During the retreat I attended at STA in April 2017, only one of the twenty-five participants was Indian; during the two retreats I attended at STA in April 2018, there were three Indians. (We can contrast this demographic with the WA retreat I attended in England in May 2018, which was comprised exclusively of Europeans and North Americans, none of whom had Indian origins.) Because only a handful of foreigners visit STA throughout the year—and an additional few live in STA’s estate during the summer months—WA’s foreign participants stand out like small speckles of white against an otherwise brown background, and indeed the WA group is often referred to by STA’s workers as “*videshi log*” (the foreign people) or, simply using the English, the “foreigners.”

The topic of WA’s use of STA for their own spiritual retreats frequently arose in conversations during my early months at STA; STA ashramites eagerly provided me with their own varied interpretations of what WA is and what its participants do while on retreat—including their assumed reasons why these foreigners have sought out a spiritual retreat in the first place. On one side of the spectrum were descriptions such as that the people who came with WA were “lost” foreigners who were searching for some semblance of redemptive spirituality, or even that they were recovering drug addicts who were in need of a rehabilitative haven in which they could recuperate. Concerned by the impact that these “lost” spiritual seekers might have on the wider atmospheres of the STA, some STA ashramites (albeit a minority) went so far as to write a formal letter of complaint to the STA leadership, requesting them to banish WA once and for all. Other regular ashramites of STA, along with some of the management, were perfectly content to have the group members come to STA, and spoke pleasantly about WA’s individual participants, but did wonder whether WA using STA’s space for their own meditation retreats was truly the type of ecumenical engagement that Jones himself would have wanted. These ashramites emphasised that the individual participants of WA should indeed be welcomed to the ashram—but as *individuals*, and not as members of WA participating in an institutionalised WA retreat. Rather, the ashramites proposed, WA individuals should join in STA’s own programmes, thus intermingling with STA’s own ashramites in order to hear about the teachings of Jesus that Jones had deemed to be so crucial to personal transformation. And still other ashramites were happy to have WA come and conduct their own meditation retreats which facilitated their own spiritual practices, but these ashramites lamented that they had always felt a deep sense of estrangement from the WA group. “And *that* [feeling estranged from others] is not how Ashram should be,” Uncle William once told me decisively.



These active contestations and controversies surrounding WA's presence at STA are particularly interesting for me as an ethnographer because one way for anthropologists to understand people—and their values, beliefs, and motives—is to pay particular attention to the *interpersonal* conflicts and frictions which arise in social settings. In the pages that follow, I present several ethnographic vignettes and then engage with them by using a thematically-focused analysis. The ethnographic material is divided into two sections. Broadly, Section 5.4 (encapsulating 2003-2011) focuses on some of the processes through which belonging is negotiated—including the significant difficulties experienced by both WA and STA as well as the emotional roller coaster experienced by both parties as WA is first welcomed at STA, then expelled from STA, and then invited to return. Based on these processes, I offer five distinct phases of belonging. Noting some belonging-related difficulties that both WA and STA experienced upon WA's return to STA in 2011, Section 5.5 (encapsulating 2011-present) explores some of the effects and the ramifications of the partial belongings that ensued from the point of WA's return.

## 5.2. MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS BELONGING

Before delving into the primary ethnographic material, let us first look at some of the theoretical discussions that have informed my analysis. In focusing on the relational dynamics between STA and WA, I have found it especially helpful and thought provoking to draw upon the emerging literature focused on multiple religious orientation (sometimes called multiple religious belonging or “dual” or “double” religious belonging) of individuals who sympathise with or participate in religious milieus other than one's home religious tradition. More broadly, I have also engaged with literature from Theology Without Walls (TWW), established in 2015 by a group of academics, which seeks to promote and cultivate spaces of mutual understanding across religious boundaries. Multiple religious orientation has been a key topic of inquiry for individuals involved in TWW scholarship. One of the most clearly articulated discussions to link dual religious belonging and TWW is offered by Paul Knitter who argues that “the practice of double religious belonging is a synonym for, or lays the foundation for, the practice of theology without walls.”<sup>2</sup> In the same work as Knitter, scholars such as Mark Heim also suggest a direct correlation between what Heim refers to as “people who are hybrid in their religious

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<sup>2</sup> Knitter, “Without Walls = Multiple Belonging?,” 492.

identities and practices” (or even simply individuals who are not firmly embedded in a singular home tradition) and TWW.<sup>3</sup>

Using standard TWW terminology to classify WA, we could understand WA as a group of multiple religious believers. Indeed, as Dana told me in one of our conversations, the group’s original name before it became “World Amrita” was “Sangha Without Walls.” This was a name that Dana had selected due to the ways it conveyed the warm note of hospitality to individuals from a myriad of diverse faith backgrounds—including individuals who, like Dana herself, drew upon more than one religious tradition—who could all feel welcomed into their *sangha* (spiritual family). Furthermore, as I mentioned above, Dana herself intentionally incorporates practices and techniques from multiple religious traditions into her meditation classes, resulting in all participants of WA receiving spiritual teachings influenced by, and inspired from, multiple religious traditions. Moreover, a number of WA participants whom I spoke with after the WA retreats in 2017 and 2018 individually conveyed to me that, even outside their time at WA retreats, they themselves drew upon multiple religious traditions in formulating their own spiritual practices. Thus, I find it especially appropriate to use TWW scholarship to frame my analysis of the contested relationships between WA and STA. Nevertheless, as I shall expand upon below, I use, in turn, the case study of WA to reflect back upon, and interrogate, some of the ideas commonly held within TWW scholarship. Specifically, I argue that the lived experiences of WA participants at STA challenge a fundamental assumption of TWW scholarship: namely, that belonging naturally occurs to those individuals who desire it.

#### 5.2.1. *Two models of multiple religious life*

Let us first turn to two models that attempt to encapsulate the various expressions and stages of multiple religious life. Peter Feldmeier and Jeanine Diller, two scholars who have both contributed to the recent scholarly field of TWW, have respectively classified the multiple-religious concept into several stages of involvement. Feldmeier identifies four distinct ways of engaging in some form of what he refers to as multi-religious belonging (MRB).<sup>4</sup> Feldmeier, writing as a Catholic theologian, explores these possible stages through the lifeworld of a Christian engaging with other traditions. These stages are: (F1) Allowing “one’s own religion to be influenced by the religious imagination of the auxiliary religion” (Feldmeier

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<sup>3</sup> Heim, “Of Two Minds about a Theology without Walls,” 486.

<sup>4</sup> Feldmeier, “Perils and Possibilities of Multiple Religions Belonging.”

identifies this form mainly with Francis Clooney); (F2) engaging in some official practices of a second religion but still identifying solely as a Christian (Feldmeier provides Robert Kennedy, both a Roman Catholic Priest and a Zen Roshi, as an example)<sup>7</sup>; (F3) identifying primarily with Christianity but holding a secondary descriptive identity, such as “Buddhist-Christian” or “Hindu-Christian” (here we might think of Bramabandhab Upadhyay whose navigation of Roman Catholicism and Vedanta we explored in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2); and (F4) holding on to two or more models of potentially contradictory worldviews and viewing them both as true (Henri le Saux, Raimon Pannikar, Paul Knitter, etc.). One can note that Feldmeier’s first two ways of engaging in multiple religious belonging continue to maintain the exclusive and sole identity of “Christian,” while the latter two allow for some intermingling with, and even supplanting of, a singular primary religious identity.

Diller also identifies several stages that are useful to our discussion here—and it is worth noting that she refers to the phenomenon as multi-religious *orientation* (MRO)—a term that I prefer to multiple-religious *belonging* due to reasons I return to below.<sup>5</sup> While Feldmeier’s first category of MRB begins with comparative theology *à la* Francis Clooney, Diller identifies four distinct categories before arriving at a similar conception of comparative theology.<sup>6</sup> However, Diller’s first two categories—(D1) conceptual openness and (D2) material contact—do not require the same level of engagement, commitment, or even participation as her latter categories. Her third and fourth categories—(D3) interfaith collaboration and (D4) dialogue—require more active participation with and alongside people of other faith commitments, but they do not require that one change one’s own beliefs or practices as a result from the increased interaction. Though, as comparative theologians frequently tell us, and also as we saw Jones attest to in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2.4), it is rare to engage in genuine dialogue with others without at least some degree of reflection on, or even change to, one’s own perspective and practices.<sup>8</sup>

Reflecting on her first four categories, Diller notes that “they are all ways of learning about [another religion] from the outside, watching or hearing about or working alongside others who are doing it. The remaining categories go progressively deeper because in them one engages in the tradition *oneself*, from the inside. These represent a new level of intensity of

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<sup>5</sup> Diller, “Multiple Religious Orientation.”

<sup>6</sup> See Francis X. Clooney, “Francis Xavier, and the World/s We (Don’t Quite) Share,” in *Jesuit Postmodern: Scholarship, Vocation, and Identity in 21st Century*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 178; A. Bagus Laksana, “Comparative Theology: Between Identity and Alterity,” in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 1–20.

participation, different not just in degree but in kind.”<sup>7</sup> Diller’s latter five categories are ones that, as she rightly draws our attention to, require more personal investment and are consequently higher-risk in their existential stances than the former—inasmuch as they necessitate individual participation. Her latter five categories are: (D5) comparative theology; (D6) adopting belief(s); (D7) adopting practice(s)—a category which Diller recognises to be a multi-layered phenomenon where both the stakes and the depth of engagement can vary immensely; (D8) identity; and (D9) belonging. For Diller, there is a crucial distinction between D8 and D9 – while in the former it is the individual who identifies oneself with one or more religious traditions, the latter ascription is conferred by the religious community.

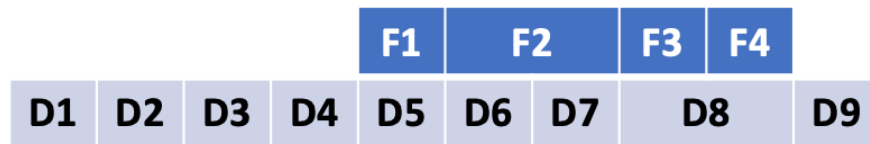
It is particularly fitting to look at Diller’s and Feldmeier’s two models side by side since the respective authors were in dialogue with each other while thinking through some of the key questions which inspired their respective papers.<sup>8</sup> The models share some categorical similarities: for example, they both highlight that there is often, especially initially, a doctrinal prioritisation of one tradition over another in which one religion is the primary or substantive identifier and the secondary or tertiary religions are often adjectival qualifiers of the primary religion. However, as much as Diller’s and Feldmeier’s models share some similarities, they also contain some rather significant differences. While Feldmeier’s model of MRB has four categories, Diller’s more extensive nine-category model of MRO commences with individuals who are not themselves actively engaging in multiple religious beliefs and/or practices, but are not “conceptually closed” to the notion of engaging with another religious tradition. Thus, Diller’s first four categories are left unaddressed by Feldmeier’s model. If we compare Feldmeier’s 4-category model with Diller’s more fine-grained 9-category model, we can note the following four correspondences with Diller’s latter 5 categories: F1 corresponds with D5; F2 corresponds with D6 and D7; and F3 (and, to an extent, F4) corresponds with D8. However, significantly, the final category of “belonging” (D9) is left totally unarticulated by Feldmeier’s model. That is, while both Feldmeier’s and Diller’s models sketch a continuum—in that the farther an individual travels along their respective categories, the deeper one is understood to participate in multiple religious life—only Diller’s model clearly articulates a category called “belonging” as distinct from the other forms of engaging with multiple religious traditions. It is likely that Feldmeier’s exclusion of “belonging” as a specific category is because Feldmeier conceptualises belonging to permeate

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<sup>7</sup> Diller, “Multiple Religious Orientation,” 342.

<sup>8</sup> Diller, 350.

through all the categories—as indicated by the fact that he refers to his model as multiple religious *belonging*. In other words, belonging is assumed to be conceptually both pervasive and intrinsic to his four categories—a designation that many scholars within TWW circles seem to uncritically ascribe to individuals who navigate multiple religious contexts.



**Figure 10: Comparing Feldmeier’s and Diller’s models**

When I consider the very concept of multiple religious *belonging* in the light of the experiences of WA participants at STA, I am struck by one crucial question: is it correct to assume that “belonging” is an inevitable result from engaging with and/or drawing from multiple religions? Or, like Diller, should we reserve “belonging” as a separate category which relies upon conscious acceptance by the religious community (or communities) in question rather than strictly the self-identification of the individual? We might pose the question in this way: if an individual says, “I belong in this church, because I self-identify as a Christian!” is this claim equivalent to, or concurrent with, that same Christian community accepting that individual’s self-identification? We can recall, from Chapter 1 (Section 1.4.2), that the anthropologist Jacob Loewen and the Christian missionary David were denied the chance to participate in the community’s healing rituals due to what the community described as the missionaries’ “lack of faith.” In the case of Jacob and David, it was therefore the broader community, and not they themselves as individuals, who could dictate who really belonged and who did not. Consequently, it was the broader community who could selectively circumscribe the extent to which the individuals could participate. We saw this selective belonging in BIR: deep “belonging” seems to require *both* self-identification as a particular brand of religious worldview *and* acceptance on the part of a larger religious community; it can be difficult to speak of “belonging” when these two facets are not properly aligned and, thus, I argue that it is unwarranted to assume that multiple religious *belonging* occurs simply on account of an individual wishing for it to occur.

### 5.2.2. *Belonging*

This leads me to define what precisely I mean by “belonging.” While dual religious *existing* could be a suitable term to describe an individual who has actively drawn upon multiple religious influences in forming their own spiritual identity, dual-religious *belonging* additionally entails some degree of, to risk a tautology, belonging. So, what exactly does it mean *to belong*? The word “belong” is rooted in the Old English word “*gelang*,” which the OED defines as being “together with.” From this etymological observation, I draw the conclusion that “belonging” necessitates some sense of physical proximity to, or an emotionally negotiated participation in, an intimate community<sup>9</sup>, in that the sense of belonging emerges out of a “togetherness” with other individuals. To belong is to be “together with.” At the same time, belonging is not a once and for all settled fact of such inclusion into a wider whole; rather, *belonging* is an ongoing process involving navigating relationships of hospitality, indifference, acceptance, hostility, and so on. Therefore, I understand “belonging” to also include an emotional and psychological component in the way that leading public figures such as Brené Brown have spoken of “belonging”: feeling that one’s entire self is wholly accepted by others without judgments or conditions. Brown associates this full-acceptance with choosing to live vulnerably. It might be helpful here to think of vulnerability not as an existential weakness nor as indicating a risk of being attacked; rather, to be vulnerable in Brown’s sense is to choose to be emotionally and psychologically unguarded due to a quiet confidence that any form of what we might conceptualise as “protective emotional armour” is simply not needed.<sup>10</sup> For another helpful definition of belonging through vulnerability within a community, we can look to the writings of Jean Vanier, a Catholic philosopher and the founder of L’Arche community projects. Vanier describes a community as a place where one must “come out of one’s shell of protection, to become vulnerable in order to love and understand others, to call them forth as special and unique, to share and to give space and nourishment to them...”<sup>11</sup> By belonging to such communities where individuals can feel fully accepted, Vanier claims, individuals “are earthed and find their identity.”<sup>12</sup> With this two-fold understanding of

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<sup>9</sup> An earlier version of Chapter 5 was presented at the conference entitled *Dual Religious Belonging in Hinduism and Christianity* at the University of Cambridge, July 2018. I am thankful for the comments that arose in the discussion, which have caused me to nuance my earlier claim. Earlier, I stated that belonging involved participation in a physical community but, as was pointed out at the conference, there are an increasing number of intimate communities that exist strictly online.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*; Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*.

<sup>11</sup> Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Vanier, 12.

belonging as both incorporation into a community and existential openness, we might ask: where do individuals who are dual (or multiple) religious *belong*? Specifically, who are the other individuals with whom they form their “together-with” communities, and who is it alongside whom they can feel wholly accepted, so that no part of themselves must be either hidden underneath a protective armour or strategically placed to the side whenever they are within that community setting, lest they be ousted from the group they seek to be a part of?

Although there are a number of self-professed dual religious believers who have written about their experiences of belonging to two or more distinct religious communities<sup>13</sup>, my subsequent analysis takes as its fundamental starting point the observation that there are also a significant number of multiple religious *existents* who struggle to feel that they truly *belong*, since *belonging* to communal systems involves, as we have seen, more full-blooded participative modes than *existing*.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, belonging does not always occur in the ways one might long for. The messiness of this in-between interpersonal reality, I argue, is a direct challenge to a fundamental assumption in much of recent TWW scholarship. The assumption that dual religious *existing* necessarily leads into dual religious *belonging* can be seen quite clearly in the work of Knitter who writes that “[the dual believer] finds oneself, surprisingly, at home in both [the primary and newfound traditions.]”<sup>15</sup> Dual belonging in the way of Knitter, who self-identifies as belonging to both Buddhism and Christianity, is indeed possible, but it is not an assured fact for all individuals who operate within multiple religious milieus. Thus, rather differently than Knitter, I argue that to unhesitatingly superimpose the thicker category of “belonging” to the thinner category of multiple religious “existing” perhaps suggests a feeling of at-home that is not always present in the lived realities of those who have to navigate these somewhat turbulent spiritual waters. Keeping in mind this kind of belonging without readymade guarantees, we return to the particular case study of WA and their time at STA.

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<sup>13</sup> See, as one example among many, the works of Paul Knitter. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*; Knitter, “Without Walls = Multiple Belonging?”

<sup>14</sup> See Rory McEntee and Michelle Voss Roberts who both focus on the ways that multiple religious individuals sometimes struggle to belong. See also Peter Feldmeier who raises this concern regarding the difficulty of belonging with direct reference to the TWW project.

McEntee, “Interspiritual Theology as a Radical Potential for New Vistas in Theological Thought”; McEntee, “The Religious Quest As Transformative Journey”; Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple”; Feldmeier, “Perils and Possibilities of Multiple Religions Belonging.”

<sup>15</sup> Knitter, “Without Walls = Multiple Belonging?,” 493.

### 5.3. THE RELATIONAL DYNAMICS OF STA AND WA IN TERMS OF MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS BELONGING

As I have already indicated in Section 5.1.1, and will continue to demonstrate below, both STA and WA are particularly concerned with the extent to which WA participants “belong” in STA. Certain members of STA actively debate whether or not WA’s presence fits within the spiritual ethos envisioned by Jones, while some members of WA are painfully aware that their invitation to use STA can be possibly revoked and, thus, they intentionally act (or refrain from acting) in particular ways to ensure that their welcome at STA continues. Of course, as is evident from some of the scholarship on TWW that I summarised above, multiple religious belonging is often spoken of in reference to one individual who appears to “belong” (or not) to two or more religious communities; that is not the way, however, that I am exploring multiple religious belonging here. TWW scholars often look at the process of one single individual belonging (or not) to multiple distinct religious communities. In a rather different vein, I am exploring the wider communitarian processes of one guest group (WA)—which is both comprised of some “multiple religious” individuals, and which is also guided by spiritual leaders who intentionally draw upon multiple religious traditions—and the ways that WA appear to “belong” (or not) to the home group (STA)—which, according to the proclamations of Jones, was formed with the intent to be open to people from a number of religious traditions (Chapter 3, Section 3.4). Indeed, just as WA itself consists of a spectrum of multiple religious individuals, so too does STA exist as a theoretically well-suited place for such individuals to feel a sense of belonging and being welcomed. Keeping these individual as well as structural features in mind, when I explore the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging, I am concerned with the occasionally subtle ways that WA has had to negotiate a sense of welcome and belonging, and also navigate hostility and opposition, within STA. By focusing our attention to the matter of “thick” belonging as I define it above and—following Diller who resolutely reserves the stage of “belonging” as a separate category which does not automatically permeate the other categories of multiple religious engagement—through examining some of the particular moments where such “belonging” is either experienced or left wanting, we can speak to the various stages of negotiating belonging in the existential and the institutional spaces between WA and STA. As we shall see in the ethnographic descriptions below, full belonging does not always occur even if one or even both parties wish for it to occur.



## 5.4. NEGOTIATING BELONGING: A CONTINUUM OF PHASES

Having now outlined some of the key terms and theoretical backdrops that inform my analysis, we can proceed to ethnographic descriptions which demonstrate some of the relational dynamics of hospitality and hostility between WA and STA. In a similar fashion to Feldmeier and Diller who have mapped out some phases of multiple religious life in their respective models of MRB and MRO, I have selected four ethnographic moments which encapsulate the processes of negotiating belonging in the context of the relational dynamics between STA and WA. I classify these as four stages: invitation and welcome, restrictions, attempts of correction, and re-establishing belonging. Crucially, my presentation of these stages as the first, second, third and fourth phase is not meant to convey that I envision them as having a strictly linear and sequential progression; on the contrary, especially when considering the interplay of phases two and three, we can see how these four phases do not always occur chronologically, nor does entering one phase entail that one has finished entirely with the preceding phase.

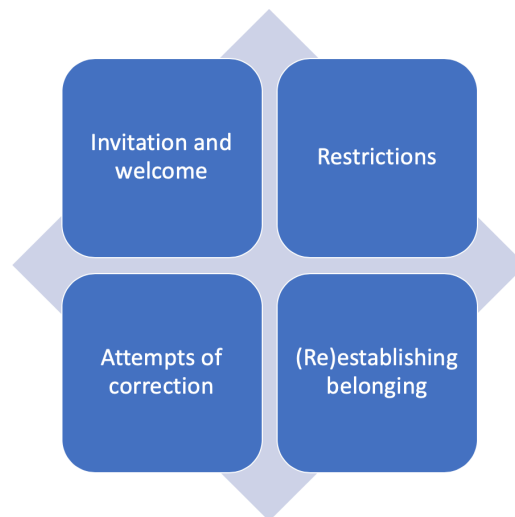


Figure 11: Phases of Belonging

### 5.4.1. *Inviting the Other: Initial invitation and welcome*

When considering the processes involved in negotiating a sense of belonging, we can begin with the initial welcome. Dana, one of the leaders of WA whom we encountered above (Section 5.1.1), recollects first finding out about STA while in Bodh Gaya (Bihar, India) around 2002. A Catholic Sister who attended a retreat in Bodh Gaya at the same time learned that Dana was looking for places to host her own retreats. The Sister later informed her own bishop about Dana's search, and shortly thereafter Dana received a letter from Bishop Anthony Fernandes

of the Roman Catholic diocese of Bareilly. The Bishop offered to show Dana around his diocese and informed her about a handful of different places in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand which might serve as a suitable retreat venue. One of these options included STA and, upon hearing the Bishop's description of it, Dana thought that its remote location and tranquil environment would be an ideal spot to host her retreats. In 2003 she arranged to meet with Auntie Eileen, who was working as STA's Hostess at the time, and during their meeting it was agreed that WA could start using STA to host its retreat that coming spring. Dana does not recall having very many interactions with the Manager (Mr. Roy) or Acharya (Acharya Verma, whom we encountered in Chapter 4, Section 4.2), and instead remembers all of her communication with STA leadership going through Auntie Eileen. Thus, for example, when Dana wondered whether the group could sing sacred songs from a variety of religious traditions in the evenings, she and the WA manager, whom I will call Emilia, first checked this matter with Auntie Eileen, who told them that their singing was permissible and that they were free to do as they wished so long as they did not become a disruptive presence for any other guests. Rather quickly, Dana explains, she and her group felt comfortable and welcomed at STA—so much so that Dana began to experiment with new meditation techniques and bodily postures during her time at STA. Dana's current meditation practice is characterised by—and in the broadly Western-based spheres of meditation retreats in which she participates, she is renowned for—lying down as a meditation posture and encouraging others to try introducing it to their own meditation practice. Her sensorimotor comfort with this posture, which she claims can be helpful in bringing about “deep rest,” is something she developed at STA, she explains, due to feeling wholeheartedly welcomed there.

#### 5.4.2. *Restricting the Other: The Barn and the Banning*

This section looks at the oppositional pinnacle of non-belonging insofar as the straining of relationship between WA and STA is concerned: in 2008, in the middle of their month-long retreat at STA, WA was prohibited from using STA's chapel for their meditation practice. And, in 2010, WA was “banned” from returning to STA at all. Both these actions are significant due to the fact that, since their first retreat in 2003, WA had been consistently using STA on an annual basis to host their retreats. There are somewhat contradictory stories about precisely what WA did which caused the STA leadership to, first, restrict WA's use of the chapel in 2008 and, then, ban the group entirely from STA in 2010. All that seemed clear was that, whatever it was, it had gone against the STA's unwritten code of conduct which had, in turn, made the

STA leadership wary of WA. Were two people from WA holding hands? Did the group worship Hindu gods and goddesses? Was the anonymous artwork (a handful of twigs and greenery, configured to resemble a seated meditation posture) once left on a common-room table for all to see, intended to be a “statue” of the Buddha? And, then, were the flowers later placed around these twigs indicative of the “statue” being revered as a sacred shrine? Perhaps it was the chanting and singing of other sacred songs that occurred by candlelight in the evening hours? Were group members secretly doing drugs? (Drugs, after all, many STA ashramites reasoned, would explain the way that WA participants sometimes lay down in the tall grass—an action most Indians would never do in the wilderness due to a well-founded fear of scorpions and poisonous snakes). There were several ideas floating around regarding precisely what it was that WA had done to lose the trust of the STA leadership; these numerous possibilities were whispered amongst some STA ashramites and narrated to me in the early months of my stay at STA from August 2016 onward. And, over a year later, when I became better acquainted with some of the teachers and participants of WA after attending my second annual retreat with WA in April 2017, I realised that many individuals from WA itself also wondered about precisely what had resulted in them being kicked out and—when the topic came up—they speculatively mused upon a number of explanations, some of which were similar to the speculations of the STA ashramites. To concretely demonstrate the multiplicity of viewpoints and speculations about the reasons why WA was kicked out of the chapel in 2008 and, subsequently, banned from STA in 2010, I provide a few different recollections of the relevant events.

Firstly, Dana recounted the scenario to me as follows:

Each group [which forms the WA retreat each year] has a different feel and this one group [in 2008] had a lot of anger and creativity...some people made really cool sculptures during the retreat...but apparently someone made some pile of stones somewhere that looked like an altar or a shrine, and maybe some people saw it and bowed to it, or maybe a person from our retreat was doing something that looked like worshipping at the pile of stones... I don't know, I think maybe it was the first...I really don't know. But this was the first thing that happened. And then also someone made a thing out of flower petals and twigs...it looked like a person meditating. But I guess it also looked like a Buddha. This was the second thing. And, of course, we were lying down in the chapel... we were not made aware of how shocking that could be to any person in any religion in India. Because we had felt so welcome when we first came to STA, we just felt we could be without reservation. And, for me, over the years, lying down as a meditative posture had begun to feel normal, so I invited people to meditate like that if they wished. And, as you know from being on retreat with me, it's not like *savasana* [corpse pose in yoga]...it's with pillows and cushions and blankets and it can look more like a nap.

So I guess it can be shocking. But I had seen that plaque on the house [the Midlakes building of STA] where it says that people from all or no religions are welcome<sup>16</sup>...and that felt encouraging to us. I don't know precisely what was a problem and what wasn't, but I know we were banned. And, ever since we were invited back [in 2011], we've done whatever we can imagine to keep that from happening again.

The Manager of STA since 2007, Vijay Patni, in his recollection of the events, offered a similar account:

Lillian walked by the chapel one time and saw that the group was lying down in the chapel. That did not sit right with her, and so she told Acharya Biswas about it. He went and saw it too. They wanted to kick the group out [of STA entirely] at that point, but they [WA] still had two weeks left of their retreat. Eventually we agreed that they'd move to a different building [and refrain from using the chapel.] It was either that, or they'd go. It wasn't great, but we did it. And now [World Amrita] uses the New Fellowship hall for their retreats—and only Christian groups use the chapel.

Vijay never forthrightly told me that it was almost entirely due to his personal, persistent advocacy of the good character of WA that the group was allowed to stay at STA at all—the extent of his efforts and his institutional influence on this matter were only shared with me later by members of WA. Amongst the STA leadership, Vijay was undoubtedly the strongest and most vocal supporter of keeping WA at the ashram, and he was also steadfast in declaring that the group had never worshiped Hindu idols while at STA. He was so convinced of this absence of “idolatry” that he once, unprompted, offered the following reasoning to me: “They [the participants of WA] are foreigners, Nadya. How could foreigners even begin to create a Hindu statue or a shrine? They were doing some art: one person came and bent this metal into a shape, another person added some flowers around it—it is all art to them. They're on a retreat, in beautiful nature, and they made some art. It was all blown out of proportion!”

We can also consider an excerpt from one of my many conversations with Lillian and Auntie Eileen who had both been deeply involved with STA at the time when WA first began visiting it. Like Vijay, Auntie Eileen was also a strong supporter of allowing WA to stay at STA and, as we shall see in the conversation below, from April 2017, she, too, fiercely defended WA against any accusations of their alleged idol worship.

Nadya (N): “During Acharya Ghosh's talk this year [2017], we met at the chapel for the [World Amrita] group but every other time we meet in the New Fellowship Hall. But Dana and Vijay have told me that the group used to

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 3, Section 3.4

have all their meetings in the chapel. Do you know why [World Amrita] doesn't meet in the chapel anymore?"

Lillian (L): "Actually, the Board asked them not to come to the ashram. Because they used to put Hindu idols in front of the chapel."

Auntie Eileen (E): "That's a lie!!!! That never happened. They all made it up."

L: "I have it seen it!! You never even went out of the kitchen!!"

E: "Rubbish...! That's rubbish, I saw them. No idols, no *pooja*. But the ashram committee did refuse them once, one year, but then later we took them in again. But they never worshipped idols, no. Yes, some foreigner came during the night one time, he had drugs and incense and when the Acharya saw all that he asked him to leave. But this was a random foreigner...he was not from their group!"

N: "But why did the Board not want the group to come?"

E: "I think they felt that they didn't respect the chapel. They were lying down, meditating...But they respect the *mandir* (temple) [that is, from stories that WA individuals have told to Auntie Eileen, she understands that they are respectful of Hindi temples and other religious places whenever they visit them], they respect the ashram. It's just, you don't [i.e. one should not] lie down. You can just listen and sit down and meditate. No problem. It's a quiet place, you have more time to meditate. But lying down...?! It is not very good."

One element of the story that all parties agree on is that, following Acharya Biswas's and Lillian's sighting of WA participants lying down in the chapel in 2008, Acharya Biswas declared that the group should leave the ashram entirely. This, Lillian pointed out to me in the same conversation from above, seemed the natural response to seeing a group use the chapel in that alleged sacrilegious manner—lying down in a sacred space was incomprehensible to many involved in STA's leadership, and the very act suggested a kind of irreverence in a sacred space. In response to the Acharya's decision, Vijay and Emilia scrambled to see if there were any compromises that could be made in order to allow WA to finish their retreat at STA. In the end, Vijay and the servants transformed an unused building (referred to as "the barn") into a make-shift meditation hall, and Acharya Biswas agreed that WA could remain at STA for the duration of their retreat; but they were no longer allowed to enter the chapel. Once the barn was sufficiently tidied, Dana, Emilia, and the WA participants moved their meditation mats and cushions out of the chapel and set up their spaces in the new location. Some of the WA participants whom I spoke with in 2016-2018 could recall the 2008 shift to the barn, and they described the process as moving from a beautiful, spacious chapel to a stinky, cramped barn

with flies and fleas everywhere—not the most inspiring of places for meditation by any means, they lamented. Further, many struggled to make sense of the ways they had been treated, claiming that it felt “unfair” to be initially accepted to the ashram, with the expectation that they would use the chapel space with its tall ceilings, large windows, and beautiful interior designs, only to be abruptly relegated to a smelly, overcrowded barn—especially midway through a retreat.

But, for many of the individuals who regularly came to STA with WA, the group’s demotion to the barn was not *just* a physical relocation. Many described it to me in a vivid manner that conveyed it was also a symbolic turning point in the relationship between WA and STA: WA no longer felt that they were free and welcome to conduct their spiritual practice with the exploratory openness that they had originally felt they were encouraged to undertake. “It says, right there, [that] ‘people of all different faiths’ are welcome,” Emilia once told me, emphatically gesturing towards the stone plaque on the main building’s verandah which contained Jones’s words from the Ashram Ideals. “So, yes, we were a bit surprised to realise that there were certain spiritual practices [that] we just could not do.”

Let us, however briefly, take one large step back from considering the present-day specifics of the relational dynamics between WA and STA, and recall that, in his Ashram Ideals, Jones explicitly stated that he wished for STA to be a place where all individuals who “sincerely desire to find God” would be welcomed (see Chapter 3.4). Jones deeply desired for all individuals to seek, and find, God—since he had himself been so profoundly transformed by his own encounter with Jesus, but, as we saw extensively in Chapter 3, Jones repeatedly emphasised the unique, transformative power of Christ and Christ alone. Having also noted Jones’s unrelenting desire to share his spiritual findings with other individuals, I am prompted to revisit some questions that we entertained towards the end of Chapter 3: what did Jones understand “sincerely desiring” and “God” to mean? Must the “seeking” inevitably involved in the “finding” follow a specific pattern or protocol? Was “God” to be used as a synonym for “Jesus” —i.e. the personal Christ whom Jones dearly loved and preached about? Through considering the case of WA, we can see that some of the Acharyas and other members of the STA leadership since the time of Jones believed that spiritual quests for God should indeed take on a rather specific style which has recognisably Christian undertones. Thus, some of the practices of WA—the prolonged silence, the varying postures of meditation, the drawing upon of sacred texts from a number of religious traditions, including those outside of the Christian canon, etc.—can seem incomprehensible as modes of spiritual seeking.

STA's dismissive attitude of spiritual practices that are not understood to have clearly-Christian undercurrents has resonances with our earlier exploration of STA's navigation of practices which were "truly Christian and truly Indian" (Chapter 3, Section 3.2); the spiritual practices which were not deemed to directly relate to furthering an individual's soteriological relationship with the person of Jesus were eventually abandoned as spiritual practices. In this same vein, some members of STA leadership wondered whether or not WA could be correctly understood as seeking *God* in their spiritual quests, since, as evidenced by WA's unhesitating adoption of practices and beliefs from religious contexts other than Christianity, WA was clearly not *sincerely desiring to find* the person of *Jesus* in the ways that Jones had desired individuals to encounter him. In Chapter 3, I pointed out that Jones's somewhat ambiguous equivalence between "Christianity" and "Christ" is either wonderful or disturbing, depending on one's comfort with ambiguity (Section 3.1.1). Through considering the relational dynamics between STA and WA, we can see that some members of STA leadership took active measures to remove any ambiguity regarding what precisely it meant to "sincerely desire to find God" in the context of STA: around 2008, Acharya Biswas petitioned to the STA leadership board that STA formally amend Jones's statement which welcomed to STA any and all individuals who "sincerely desire to find God." Instead, Acharya Biswas proposed, the stone plaque on the Midlakes building should be changed to read that anyone who desires to find, and thus seeks, *Jesus* should be welcomed at STA. This Christocentric modification of Jones's original vision was clearly prompted by STA's interactions with WA, and exemplifies some of the ways that belonging is negotiated—even in behind-the-scene manners.

The following year, in 2009, WA returned to STA—this time arranging ahead of time to use a section of cabins in a part of the ashram's large estate which was not in the immediate surroundings of the ashram's main buildings. The leaders of WA conducted their usual silent meditation retreat, but, Dana and Emilia recount, they were particularly apprehensive about which spiritual practices to include or exclude from their retreat. When the retreat finished that year, WA participants left STA in the ways they had always done—some individuals left immediately to attend another meditation retreat in a different part of India, others lingered on as individuals in the solace of STA's quiet hills and lakes for a few more days, and still others returned to their workplaces or other points of interest. Dana took a train to Lucknow to be near one of her own spiritual teachers, and Emilia began the long journey of returning to her home in Auroville (South India). However, though it was unknown to them at the time of their leaving, they were not to be welcomed back the following year. When, later that autumn, the

time came for WA to plan the details of their retreats for 2010, Emilia was informed by Vijay that the members of the STA leadership committee had met to discuss the contentious topic of WA's presence at STA, and ultimately decided to discontinue their relationship with WA. The details of the discussion, along with the angles from which the various STA committee members had approached the discussion, were never disclosed to me by anyone at STA—perhaps because these proceedings took place so many years ago and the details were murky. When I asked Dana about the year they were not invited to return to STA, she also confessed that she could not remember many details. “All I remember,” she told me, “is that I didn't actually speak with anyone other than Vijay about it. It was the same as before [in 2008 when they were moved to the barn.] The decision was made, by someone else surely, and Vijay came as the regretful messenger.” “Which time do you mean—” I asked, “—the year you did not return back?” Dana barely let me finish my question before emphatically clarifying, “The year we were *banned*.” Her sense of hurt at being excluded by a once inviting ashram was palpable.

Both the incidents of being moved from the chapel to the barn in 2008, as well as being disallowed entirely in 2010, are important to narrate due to the ways that these agonistic interactions fundamentally changed the relational dynamics between WA and STA and set the stage for the ways in which WA had to re-negotiate their sense of belonging at STA.

#### 5.4.3. *Correcting the Other: Acharya Biswas gives a sermon to WA*

The third phase that we will consider is that of one party—STA, as host— attempting to correct and re-align the spiritual practices and beliefs of the other party—WA, as invitee. In 2009, the year between when WA was moved from the chapel to the barn (2008) and when they were “banned” entirely from the ashram (2010), Acharya Biswas asked Dana if he could deliver two lessons to the group during their 1-hour teaching sessions. Dana agreed, but, after getting a sense from Acharya Biswas about the content of his preaching, she told the WA participants that their attendance was optional and that anyone, especially those who might be particularly sensitive to certain “exclusivist” teachings within Christian contexts, was allowed to skip the talk if they wished to do so. However, she emphasised to the group that it would be good for WA to be well-represented at the talk so as to demonstrate the group's receptivity to the STA leadership and their teachings.

A long-time participant of WA described his recollection of Acharya Biswas's first teaching:



All I remember is that he was angry; there was a lot of emotional energy coming from him—anger. He was shouting at us in this sermon. It felt like listening to a television kind of preacher, speaking about fire and hell and brimstone. Obviously, it was assumed we're Christians since we're foreigners.<sup>17</sup> He said we were lost. He told us that we'd go to hell if we don't come back to Christianity...and that, if we meditate, we'll go to hell. On and on. Not just his words but also his energy. I think he felt disappointed that so many foreigners were coming to this ashram, he assumed we were from some Christian backgrounds but had ceased practising. He found it disappointing that he couldn't get through to most of us. He must have been surprised that people coming here don't want to have anything to do with Christianity...but he was angry.

Dana referred to the Acharya's sermon in more succinct terms: "he told us that meditators go to hell. It was very painful. I don't think he could understand why anyone would be anything other than Christian." News of Acharya Biswas's now-infamous and somewhat apocalyptic 2009 sermon to WA had also circulated amongst STA ashramites. On one occasion, when I was speaking with Auntie Eileen and two long-term STA ashramites about whether STA's various Acharyas had ever delivered messages to the WA group, one of the ashramites chuckled, and went straight to the point that I had tried to avoid bringing up so directly myself. "You mean Biswas's sermon? He was *direct!*" And, another time, Acharya Ghosh referred to Acharya Biswas's sermon with the following turn of phrase: "good heart but unwise action."

I was never able to meet Acharya Biswas in person, though we did correspond by phone and email on several occasions. I purposefully never raised the topic of WA to him, but he once brought it up of his own accord. "Sometimes non-Christian groups come to our ashram," he explained. "There is one such group, WA. Once they invited me to speak. They were gentle and very systematic...but they were seeking an alternative to Christ. I said that it is not possible to find an alternate for Christ, as He is the Ultimate. Some of them agreed [with me] but not all."

When Dana tried to make sense of Acharya Biswas's actions, she drew upon her own background within evangelical Christianity in America. She told me, "I can understand why he gave that sermon. It's what he does as a pastor. He was trying to *save* people...people who he probably thinks are lost. Maybe he thought this was his only chance to save them. I get it." In

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<sup>17</sup> The reader can recall, from Chapter 2, the extent to which many Indians associated Christianity with foreigners on account of the various interactions that European colonial powers had with the Indian public. Though we did not explore it in Chapter 2, equally, there is often an association between foreigners and Christianity; that is to say, foreigners are often assumed to belong to, and actively participate in, a Christian faith.

spite of efforts from both sides to understand the other party, the phenomenon of one party attempting to correct the other had decisive consequences for the relational dynamics between WA and STA.

#### 5.4.4. *Circumnavigating the Other: efforts to re-establish belonging*

The fourth phase that we shall look at is the effort of WA to re-establish a sense of being and feeling welcomed at STA. Above, I have already mentioned the lengths that some members of STA, including the STA Manager Vijay, went to in attempting to re-establish a sense of belonging for WA by petitioning for them to be able to continue to use STA as a base to host their retreats. Here, we will look specifically at the various measures that WA undertook in order to try to secure their ongoing welcome at STA. For this discussion, it is important to gain first a basic understanding of the format of WA's retreats.

At the beginning of WA's retreats at STA, all of the WA participants meet in the meditation hall and the WA manager, Emilia, informs the group about the format of the retreat. Emilia tells the participants that, once the retreat commences, all participants are to remain completely silent for the duration of the seven days, other than during (optional) 1:1 interviews with Dana which occur daily between 10-11 am. Body language (eye contact, etc.) is optional, and individuals can choose the extent to which they want to refrain from body language altogether—the workers at STA have been told, Emilia emphasises, that nobody is being rude if they refrain from eye contact or the smiling gesture of a “hello” in the mornings. Even when in the privacy of their room, participants are encouraged to stay away from all forms of communication (no checking emails, no texting friends), and reading books and listening to music is also discouraged so as to enable a deep introspection. In addition to providing participants with the daily schedule which includes various styles and forms of meditation, teachings by Dana, individual's daily work tasks, meal times, etc., Emilia also uses this opening meeting to inform the participants about a number of rules which, she explains, are “part of the reality of being in an Indian Christian ashram” and which must be strictly followed in order for WA to continue to maintain a positive relationship with STA—a relationship which, Emilia tells the group, “has deepened over the years.”

Some of these rules, most of which had already been iterated to the group via email correspondence leading up to the retreat, include:

1. No use of any non-Christian religious images, including *malas* [beads often worn around the neck, and used in meditation practice], statues or even T-shirts which have Hindu-styled insignia on them, etc. Retreat participants are told that if they do have any of these items they should keep them inside their bags in their rooms until they depart from the ashram.
2. No physical contact between men and women. WA participants were told in a pre-retreat email, “we can feel and express connection with new and old friends in ways other than hugging. Please express your warmth to people of the other gender with a look, a namaste or a warm hello!”
3. During the evening time of meditative chanting, no singing of songs that could be thought of as “too Hindu.”

These rules were not ones that had been externally imposed on WA by STA. Nor were they rules that were standard to WA’s retreats—something I learned later while attending WA retreats in other locations, and also by asking Dana if there were any restrictions that WA observed when hosting a retreat at a location other than STA. On the contrary, these were rules that WA had imposed on itself in the context of STA alone. This self-imposition of rules by WA demonstrates the extent to which WA would restrict their actions and styles of behaviour rather than risk forfeiting their welcome at STA a second time. As Dana tersely said to the WA group during the introductory meeting at the retreat in April 2017, “and please follow them. The threat is real. We’ve already been kicked out.”

#### 5.4.5. *Navigating the processes of belonging*

What we see in the case of the contested middle between WA and STA is that, in spite of an initial invitation and a sense of unconditional welcome, the two parties struggled to maintain an ongoing sense of deep belonging. As I mentioned above, the four stages of negotiating a sense of belonging that I have outlined here—inviting the other, restricting the other, correcting the other, and circumnavigating the other—should not be interpreted as if they are linear processes which pass neatly from one discrete phase to another. At the same time, nor are they clearly cyclical. By this, I mean that, even though WA did indeed re-gain their invitation to STA, we will see that the re-established welcome (5.4.4) had a rather different existential feel to it than the initial welcome (5.4.1), in which a total and unencumbered freedom was felt by WA. Noting the ways that the belonging which was experienced by WA, the second time around, was what we could understand as a “partial belonging,” rather than the deep belonging originally experienced in their initial welcome, Section 5.5 will focus in more detail on this kind of partial belonging.

## 5.5. EXPERIENCING PARTIAL BELONGING

Using a selection of ethnographic descriptions, this section demonstrates some of the ramifications of partial belonging. I have selected three moments from my fieldwork which highlight some of the ongoing repercussions—they primarily feature the interactions from April 2018 between the WA group and Acharya Ghosh, who was the Resident Acharya of STA at that time. I present them, first, as thick descriptions without analysis with the aim of drawing the reader into these vignettes without the interruption that sometimes occurs through analysis. Following the three descriptions, I provide some analytic reflections in Section 5.5.4 which effectively show the difficulties that both sides experienced in their processes of navigating belonging.

### 5.5.1. *Acharya Ghosh gives a sermon to World Amrita*

WA had not received a sermon from anyone within STA since the time that Acharya Biswas gave a sermon in 2009. So, when I learned in April 2018 that Acharya Ghosh was scheduled to give a talk to WA, I was rather surprised. Over tea, I asked him whether WA had invited him to speak to them.

Acharya Ghosh (AG): “No, I asked them for it. The ashram committee has decided that every group that comes, university groups or any groups, the resident Acharya must give them a talk. But WA are wary [about receiving a sermon from an Acharya], due to Biswas [and the sermon that he gave to them] from one decade ago.”

Nadya (N): “Yeah, I’ve heard that story [of Acharya Biswas’ sermon] from a couple of people.”

AG: (laughing) “Poor fellow, good heart, but [that particular sermon was given] with very little wisdom. [...] I think many people have had Christian teachings but they have no love. They have no love for God and no love for their fellow men.”

With these comments of wisdom and love in mind, I was particularly surprised when listening to the content of Acharya Ghosh’s talk one or two days later. In his talk, he first spent a few minutes summarising the history of the ashram and the ways that Jones had envisioned it, but following from this historical account, he went on to articulate some ways that Christian truths are superior to those of other spiritual traditions. I quote extensively from the talk that Acharya Ghosh gave.

[...] The first time [Jones] met Gandhi was in St. Stephen’s College, Delhi.

He posed a straight question to Gandhi – “How can we naturalize Christianity in India? What can you as a Hindu leader, tell me, a Christian leader about this?” Gandhi responded: “First, all missionaries and leaders should begin to live like Jesus Christ. Second, practise religion without adulterating or toning it down. Third: Emphasize love and make it your driving force. Fourth: Study the non-Christian religions to have a more sympathetic approach to the people.” He had put his finger on the sore points of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> When he came to India, Jones felt Christianity was very Westernised. His vision was to reach the educated classes while everyone was working with the lower class. He learnt about many religions and then he found out that the best way to reach them was to start his own ashram. Like the ashrams of Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. He used to visit their ashrams and he thought he should start the ashram and invite people of all faiths to shape the community in the kingdom of God. A miniature kingdom – that was the purpose of this ashram.

[...]

He strived to indigenise Christianity and he was successful to a certain extent. But he never forced anyone. His other method was a round table conference where he used to travel to different cities, invite people of all and no faith with two rules: You share your experience of God and faith but don’t condemn or criticize others. Then, in the end, he would share his experience of Christ. He would never apologise or compromise the uniqueness of Christ. He never diluted his faith.

[...]

Non-Christian religions seem to have no morality. I don’t mean to be negative, but we have all this creativity, all these practices...but where is our morality...how do we manage our affairs? Are we protecting it? Caring for it? Or are we destroying it?

[...]

Nowadays, nobody talks about sin and repentance. They talk about *faith*. But what is faith?<sup>19</sup> Because even the demons have it. Faithfulness in Old Testament is teaching, doctrine and commitment, surrender. Hebrews 11 says, “faith is conviction, assurance of things not seen.” The important thing is not how much you believe but in whom you believe. I have a good friend of mine, psychology professor, religious man, practises yoga but he is also curious about Christianity. He was talking about God being impersonal. I said, “the chair you’re sitting on, is it personal or impersonal?” He said impersonal. I asked: “Are you a person or impersonal?” He said, “person.” Then I asked, “who is greater? You or the chair?” He said, “Joseph, I got your point.” Then another time, he said that one thing he didn’t like about Christians and Muslims is that “you folks are very *exclusive*.” I replied that

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<sup>18</sup> If we compare this narrative with the accounts I provided in Chapter 3, we can see just how standardised and well-known this story is amongst the members of STA.

<sup>19</sup> Recalling the conversation between Acharya Ghosh and Vihaan in Chapter 4 (Section 4.3.4), we can see the extent to which this question “what is faith” was a rather important motif for Acharya Ghosh.

*truth is exclusive.* If something is true, then something [else] must be false.  
Everything cannot be right, and everything cannot be wrong.

Acharya Ghosh finished his sermon the way he had opened it—with a prayer to Jesus—and when he stopped speaking the room was silent. He looked around the chapel at the group, “Any questions? I know you are all a silent bunch,” he said, smiling, “but do you have any questions? Anything at all?” He was met with more silence. “Does this mean you’ve understood me perfectly? ...Or have you not understood anything?”

The somewhat uneasy silence that had descended over the room began to feel noticeably heavier. Finally, one British woman raised her hand. When Acharya Ghosh called upon her to speak, she said with a smile, “I just wanted to say that the ashram is a very beautiful place. Thank you,” and then she made a slight bow with her head, hands pressed at her heart. A few more moments of silence passed and then another woman raised her hand, “I was just wondering...why is there a fish on the wall of the dining hall?” The Acharya stared at her somewhat incredulously, presumably wondering if anyone at all would ask him a question related to his sermon, before rattling off an explanation of how the fish is a symbol from early Christianity. “No questions? About what I said?”, the Acharya asked, noticeably perplexed. The questions that were posed to him, Acharya Ghosh later told me, were not at all of the kind he had expected or hoped for.

#### 5.5.2. *“The Silent Bunch” Speak Out*

It was only later, out of the earshot of the Acharya, that people gradually started to share their questions or state their reasons for not putting questions to the Acharya. When the topic of the Acharya’s talk came up in the daily Q&A that Dana hosted for the group, one man expressed that he felt that the Acharya’s tone and face indicated a clear disinterest in dialoging with others. “So I thought—why bother?”, he explained with a shrug of his shoulders. Others indicated that they had serious philosophical disagreements with the conclusions that the Acharya had reached in his talk—specifically with regard to the way he presumed non-Christian religions to be lacking in morality, the manner in which he quickly dismissed the idea of an impersonal God, and the way that he determined that truth must be exclusive. These same topics were then discussed at length within the WA group, and the discussion was so vibrant that the group exceeded the normally-allotted time for Q&A. But, importantly, the same individuals who brought up these topics and contributed to the conversation explicitly

mentioned that they had consciously refrained from bringing them up with the Acharya even though he had asked them if they had any questions about the content of his talk. They feared that, if they were to clearly articulate why they read Buddhist texts, or practised meditation, rather than discuss themes more traditional to Christianity, they would be judged as people who had intentionally chosen what, in the eyes of the ashram, was an incorrect spiritual path. Still others admitted that they knew very little about Christianity, and did have some questions about Christian doctrine, but they explained that they dreaded being “found out” as someone who did not know enough about the Bible. Both of these later possibilities, people worried, might reflect poorly on WA, and might damage the relationship that Dana and Emilia had strived to re-establish since being welcomed back to STA in 2011. Later, after the retreat finished, several individuals from WA shared with me that they consciously chose not to speak with the Acharya either then or at other occasions; they instead chose to stay silent.

### 5.5.3. *Making Sense of the Other*

As a final description, I want to turn to another conversation I had with Acharya Ghosh, in which he asked me a number of questions about WA. It was not the first time that he and I had spoken about WA—after I attended WA’s retreat in April 2017 he promptly asked me questions about my experiences with the group—but by April 2018 he had himself been in contact with the WA group, and his curiosity had peaked.

AG: “All of them are from Christian backgrounds?”

N: “I don’t know.”

AG: “Which countries do they come from?”

N: “Well...countries don’t always indicate the faith, you know? But...they’re from all over: lots from Germany, Australia, US, Israel.”

AG: “Do they come to India only for this programme or do they live in India?”

N: “Some of them have just come to India for the programme, some of them have lived in India for 4 months. Some of them live in India year-round, I think.”

AG: “So what is the teacher’s [Dana’s] background?”

N: “You should ask her, from what I know, she is American and she grew up in a Christian context, I don’t know from which denomination. I don’t know if then she had some time—”

AG: “Is she married?”

N: "I am not sure about that; I don't know. I know she did move to India for a number of years where she was receiving teachings from one particular guru, and I think—"

AG: "Hindu guru?"

N: "Yes. I forget his name."

AG: "I had a chat with Dana yesterday for about 15-20 minutes...but, too short to understand. [i.e. There is not much that you can understand in such a short time about someone.] You need to know a person, and all their background to understand."

N: "Yeah, when they say something and you don't know exactly what they—"

AG: "And what were the lectures that she was giving? What were some of the topics?"

N: "They are not structured in the same way that the ashram programme is structured. The topics are not so easy to define, for me. It is sometimes led by the group, and the teacher responds. The topics are not usually pre-selected."

AG: "You see, when I was talking, I asked her a few questions, but I was not very satisfied with the answer. She said they do 'meditation,' I asked her what kind of meditation. She said thinking about our own past lives and present lives, you see but those are very general terms."

N: "Yeah, I think her teachings are also very general. I would say there are influences from Hinduism, Christianity, but she is not teaching Christianity or Hinduism per se. She reads a lot of poetry out loud, written by different nature poets, I guess—you know, some Romantic poets have felt very connected to the trees or water or air. She has shared a lot of those poems in her teachings...and this place [STA] is so fitting for it, *hai na* [isn't it]? Maybe you could ask her if you could attend her teaching."

AG: "Well I went down [to the teaching time yesterday] and I couldn't understand half the things she said because firstly she spoke very softly. So I went away, I so wanted to stay. I mean they seem very nice, very decent people. Also they're disciplined and keep to themselves when they're here. But...I mean, so much of silence is peculiar."

N: "What is peculiar about it?"

AG: "So the *entire day* they are silent. But God has given us the gift of speech. Silence is important, I agree. I like being alone for some time in quiet, too. Silence is important, you meditate yes... but for us Christians it's meditating on God's word, God's nature and God's creation. I mean we meditate on God's word, and she said it's not words [that they meditate on] and I said 'but words are connected with ideas.' There's an old English saying, 'sow a thought, reap an action.' I add to it, 'sow a phrase or a word and reap a thought.' You see, no thoughts will come without words...I think we cannot empty our mind."

N: "I don't know that anyone is trying to do that."

AG: "The Hindu concept is yoga, you empty your mind, it's just theory, you can't do it in practice."



N: “Well, I haven’t heard anyone here saying that they’re trying to do that, and I haven’t been taught to do it by the teacher. I think many people come here to reflect on a life event that has happened to them and they think that having a time of silence will help them get through that[...] It is different than STA programmes—this week of silence—but I think it’s a very—”

AG: “In the ashram, we [at the SoE, or in the Ashram Programme] have to be silent in the middle of a meditation or the end but very few people actually manage to do that. And there is the silence day...every Sunday.”

N: “Acharyaji, I have never noticed anyone observing this silence day. Now, a day of sightseeing in Nainital...*that* I have seen!”

AG: “Well, when you have a big group, it’s very difficult and people normally come [to STA] for holidaying. Whether you like it or not, you say it or not, it’s a fact. But this [World Amrita], they are different, because they are so disciplined in their conduct. Not holidaying, purely meditating. They are very spiritual. Very focused. They keep quiet and meditate, but the thing is...what are they trying to achieve or what are they heading for? That is the question. And I don’t know why they didn’t ask me any questions, they all just sat there. Listened politely, sure. Very polite. But no questions, just silence! Always silence. I prefer the groups who engage you.”

#### 5.5.4. *Analysing the Repercussions of Partial belonging*

When we consider these three ethnographic descriptions, there are a number of features which stand out regarding the relational dynamics between WA and STA. I consider these as expressions and repercussions of partial belonging, and, more specifically, I look at belonging within a broader context of power dynamics.

The intentional withholding of questions and dialogue that followed Acharya Ghosh’s sermon, as well as the ardent decisions of many WA individuals to “stay silent” in the presence of the STA leaders even after their retreats had finished, clearly show that there are power dynamics at play.<sup>20</sup> At first glance, it might seem straightforward to suggest that STA leaders hold a clear upper hand as far as asymmetrical power is concerned. After all, it is STA which owns the ashram grounds, and the STA leadership could refuse to allow WA to return if they so wished. As we saw in Section 5.4.2, STA leaders have the institutional power to make WA leave the chapel, or to even ban them from STA entirely, thus suggesting that any invitation of welcome and belonging can come along with certain prescriptive terms and institutional conditions. In other words, the one who has been invited to belong is normatively bound by these terms and conditions and cannot always express themselves freely or fully—and,

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<sup>20</sup> Several insights from this section are due to my conversations with Nika Kuchuk.

crucially, in this interpretation the “guest” group is thus in a less powerful position than the “home” group.

However, I propose an alternate interpretation. If we reflect on this dynamic through the lens of Foucault’s critique of the notion of power as a top-down structure in which power is wielded in order to control people’s bodies and actions, we can reconsider whether WA’s reactions to the institutional structures of STA is indeed an expression of WA being less powerful than STA. Foucault rejects the notion that power acts through repressive mechanisms or filters down from an apex of a pyramidal structure, and instead conceives of power as an impersonal force that permeates a plurality of sites and which is neither uni-directional nor exclusively top-down.<sup>21</sup> This power is present everywhere. Individuals, who simultaneously dominate others and are involved in their own domination by others, move along the threads of networks of both power and resistance—since resistance, too, is intertwined with power. In this Foucauldian understanding of power, then, the binary between ruler and ruled, or powerful and powerless, is dissipated. Following Foucault in this particular respect, I want to highlight the ways that members of WA also exercise some measure of agency in acting (or refraining from acting) from within their own places of power. This analytical lens can therefore illuminate the ways that WA regulated and censored its own group members (Section 5.4.4) in restrictive ways that the WA leadership do not adopt at other retreat locations, as well as the ways that some members of WA chose to “stay silent” and to not dialogue openly with the STA leadership (Section 5.5.2). These complexly dynamic interactions between WA and STA echo the observations made by some theorists of the Subaltern Studies group that the two domains of the “elite” and the “subaltern” in colonial India were not entirely disconnected from each other but rather existed in a series of oppositional relationships which were historically negotiated through various alliances, strategies, and mobilisations.<sup>22</sup>

When we employ this analytical framework in which individuals exercise agency against dense structural backdrops, our discussion of power becomes particularly interesting. Namely, we can consider the dynamic routes along which there are ongoing negotiations of power at play, and we can see close-up the ways that power and resistance are far from uni-directional. That is, WA individuals are themselves exercising a form of power through leveraging their own agency: they consistently choose to be silent, and to not engage in dialogue with the ashram leaders about questions of faith. In the past, some participants have

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<sup>21</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93; Foucault, “Disciplinary Power and Subjection.”

<sup>22</sup> Sarkar, “The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-Operation, c. 1905-22.”

even developed creative means to ensure that the Acharya does not have an opportunity to speak to their group.<sup>23</sup> They choose when (or when not) to act vulnerably, and they use (or avoid using) their freedom to speak about topics—topics about which many *do* hold strong opinions—not solely to respect the ashram, but also to strategically hold onto their welcome at and by STA. Some participants from WA describe STA itself not just as a beautiful place for meditation, but also as being suffused with a certain spiritual atmosphere which makes them feel spiritually at home and which enables and promotes their own spiritual practice. As such, they take calculated measures in order to ensure that they can stay. Thus, we do not see, simply, one group being hegemonically silenced and submissively giving up all power to the authoritative summit of the ashram. Rather, a more nuanced Foucauldian consideration of the microprocesses of the situation reveals that WA is also wielding a “softer” form of power themselves; one which is crafted out of its self-interested designs, projects, and visions. I do not mean to suggest that WA did not genuinely want to respect the ashram—indeed, I think they did. But their goal to remain at the ashram effectively led to an exercise of their own power and agency, and they did not refrain from exercising this power.

I understand both forms of power—the power of STA to regulate and direct WA’s actions and the power of WA itself in taking calculated measures with regard to which of their actions or beliefs they would share with STA—to shape the possibilities of open dialogue, and even the very idea of people from different backgrounds being truly welcomed to join in together. Often, when theorising about interreligious dialogue and ecumenical community, or dual-religious belonging, it is tempting to assume that in a dialogue of existential and institutional transparency: we speak and we are understood; we invite the others to speak and then, as we listen, we also understand them. But, as played out on the ethnographic terrain of STA, this ideal-typical scenario is not always realised. Sometimes we do not speak. Sometimes we do not—either directly through our words or indirectly through our relational postures—invite others to speak to us. Sometimes we do not listen. Sometimes we listen but do not understand. And, sometimes, we understand but we do not want to accept or to believe what we hear. There can be a plethora of real-world reasons behind why open dialogue does not occur. We have to ask ourselves, then, what do these potential dynamics mean for our discussions of communities that seek to welcome and integrate—indeed, to *invite*—others to join in their spiritual community? Just as we saw in Chapter 1 in our discussion of BIR, and

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<sup>23</sup> In 2011, Acharya Biswas requested to give another sermon to the group. The leaders of WA agreed, verbally, but intentionally acted in ways so as to delay his sermon, thus subverting any chance for him to give a sermon to their group.

again here in our discussion of belonging, sometimes the desire and the intention to be a part of something does not automatically result in the materialization of that desire.

We see a slightly different iteration of this intuitional failure to actualise the desire to bring together different individuals and worldviews into one singular community in the conversation with Acharya Ghosh (5.5.3). In varying ways, the Acharya tried to make sense of WA, but he found it difficult to accept their spiritual practices as worthwhile. Indeed, he had the utmost respect for their discipline and work ethic; he also thought that they pursued their spiritual practice with a fervour that he admitted he did not frequently see amongst STA's own Christian ashramites. And yet, he could not seem to wrap his mind around what precisely WA's spiritual practice *did* for them in real-world terms, or, in turn, why they did the things they did. Why did they keep such long periods of silence? Why, especially if they had already been exposed to Christianity through their cultural backgrounds, did they go out of their home traditions and seek out spirituality in a different tradition? Not only was he not able to comprehend these matters of existential quests and shifting identities but, in many ways, he frankly admitted that he was not interested in trying to do so. His desire to dialogue, or not to dialogue, was inseparable from his Christocentric evaluation of what was an "interesting" or even "useful" form of spiritual practice. The result was that he was not interested, seemingly at odds with some of the original visions of Jones, in either pursuing a dialogue with the group, or in exploring how both he and them—with their differing views of spirituality—might form a spiritual community together.

## 5.6. CONCLUSION

Within the context of ongoing scholarly discussions of multiple religious belonging, this chapter has taken up the question of "belonging" in multiple religious contexts through considering the relational dynamics between STA and WA. By considering Feldmeier's and Diller's respective models for MRB and MRO side by side, we noted, highlighting Diller's work specifically, that belonging does not always occur in the lives of individuals who navigate two or more religious traditions; on the contrary, belonging is an ongoing process involving the decisions and attitudes of all parties involved; belonging necessitates a negotiation of sometimes complicated relational dynamics including the initial invitations, restrictions, corrections, and re-establishments of belonging. We also noted that WA, which occupies a unique place in the landscape of STA as far as visiting groups are concerned due to the way in which they are the only visitors who are there for a spiritual purpose which is *not* explicitly Christian, navigates a form of "partial belonging." In this partial belonging, the first aspect of

belonging, being “together with” others, is experienced, but the whole-hearted vulnerability correlated with a sense of feeling fully accepted is left wanting. By documenting and exploring some of the ongoing relational dynamics between STA and WA from 2003-present, we have provided original ethnographic material which demonstrates an important aspect of present-day life at STA; additionally, the ethnographic material also acts as a case study which provides us with real-life material through which we can reconsider and further nuance our understanding of multiple religious belonging. Through highlighting the relational dynamics between STA and WA, I have offered four phases of belonging (Section 5.4) and have also shown some of the microprocesses involved in negotiating existential belonging, thereby prompting us to reconsider some fundamental assumptions about belonging. Indeed, as this chapter has clearly demonstrated, much of the scholarship on multiple religious belonging takes as its starting point that belonging naturally occurs for those who wish it; our close-up examination of the tensions, negotiations, and resolutions between WA and STA have shown that belonging is an ongoing—and, at times, challenging—process for both sides.

## Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

In the Introduction I suggested that the events and relational dynamics of STA should be understood as both *transitional* and *embodied* social processes. Throughout this thesis, we have seen some of the many ways that the individuals of STA and, consequently, STA as a microsite itself, experienced near-continual changes. Regarding Jones's own understandings of Christian identity and Christian theology more broadly, we have seen how Jones repeatedly underwent transformations of thought as a result of the social interactions that he had with others—especially the interpersonal interactions he had with non-Christians in India. As a result of these transitions and transformations, at STA we see a number of ever-changing processes: not only are the defining features of identities like “Christian” and “Indian” challenged, re-configured, and re-defined throughout the decades of history at STA since its establishment in 1930, but so too are the very social dynamics of STA itself. These shifting social dynamics were revealed rather concretely through exploring some of the *embodied* social processes of STA—the postures of meditation, the selections of songs, the embodied gestures such as the three-fingered signal of “Jesus is Lord”, the consumption of (non)vegetarian food, the chosen styles of Western vs. Indian dress, and so forth. Further, these embodied social processes also signalled another form of transition that occurred at STA: there were stark changes not only in the social dynamics and interpersonal relations of STA, but there were also changes in the very socio-demographics of the individuals who attended the ashram—these contrasts were shown clearly when considering STA in the 1930s, 1990s, and 2000s and noting the respective changes in attendance from upper-class Brahmins, to individuals from low caste and low socio-economic backgrounds, and to “foreigners” from broadly Western backgrounds.

In addition to highlighting the *transitional* and *embodied* elements of STA, the Introduction of this thesis also noted that STA's relational dynamics needed to be understood *synergistically*. That is, while it is certainly important to focus on some of the intricate and mundane details of daily life at STA—after all, this sort of particular focus and “thick” description is what gives life to any ethnographic study—I emphasised that we must *also* focus on the broader contexts in which STA exists—and, indeed, within which STA is deeply embedded. In this vein, we summarised not only some of the crucial moments of the historical relationships between Christian and non-Christian communities in India throughout the decades and centuries preceding the establishment of STA, but we also highlighted some of the external factors which influenced STA during its formative years—the various social and

political landscapes which have surrounded STA in the 1930s, leading up to the 1990s, and the present-day.

Through considering our exploration of STA in light of its *transitional* and *embodied* elements, and also, *synergistically*, within the context of its broader frames of reference, this thesis has demonstrated not only that the negotiations of Hindu and Christian identities have changed over the course of the ashram's life, but also that these very changes matched—indeed, they were the product of—surrounding shifts in the social and political landscapes of India. Through focusing on both the microcosm of STA and the macrocosm of the external contexts which have influenced STA, we have been able to formulate, explore, and at times re-define a number of important philosophical themes and questions—especially those related to concepts of invitation, belonging, otherness, and interreligious relations. Put alternately, and returning to an image alluded to in the Introduction, we have seen how STA can be understood analogously as the mouth of the infant Krishna: wondrous enough to encapsulate the entire cosmos, and yet simultaneously small enough to be seen in one single glance. Our fieldsite of STA—as Krishna's mouth—is filled not with stars, galaxies, planets, and oceans, but with deeply interwoven political, historical, and social histories. And, of course, it is filled with *people*. It has been through considering these interlaced contexts—meticulously stitched into the fabric of individuals' interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships and life stories—that we, in turn, have been able to pose and explore deeper philosophical questions.

“What is the secret to getting along with those who are different than us?”, “What works and what doesn't?” “What does it mean truly belong?”, “What does it look like to navigate our genuine differences while also being true to our own beliefs?”

Questions such as these, which, as I mentioned in the earliest pages of this work, were posed to me by family and friends numerous times throughout the course of my PhD, were also questions that I, at times, asked myself while in the field or at my library desk. Although they are not, as I forewarned, questions that I have sought to answer in this work, I trust that my analysis and writing has given the reader helpful tools with which to explore these very questions more deeply. On one level, this work has documented and explored many different manners of *invitation* in each of its chapters—something that Section 6.3 summarises in more detail. And, in this vein, this work contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions on the topic of invitation—adding to recent works by influential scholars like Joel Robbins and Muthuraj

Swamy.<sup>1</sup> But this work is also an invitation in and of itself; it is an *invitation* to allow the personal narratives and the on-the-ground nuances contained in the ethnographic data to *reshape* some of our existing conceptual understandings. Specifically, through coming to terms with the inevitable on-the-ground messiness of the social dynamics at STA, we have been challenged to reconfigure our conceptual understandings of what it means to *invite* an Other into our midst, and what it looks like to *belong*. This thesis has documented and described many of the tensions, ambiguities, struggles, negotiations, and resolutions which collectively comprise the process of inviting and belonging—for it is indeed a *process* with many phases and layers which, somewhat inconveniently, do not always follow a predictable pattern. Our ethnographic exploration of STA has demonstrated that the very concept of *belonging* must thus be understood to not automatically occur despite an individual—or even two parties—wishing for it to occur.

## 6.1. SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS

In addition to using ethnographic data to reconfigure certain theoretical concepts, this thesis has made specific contributions to what could be understood as three different categories of readers:

(1) Scholars within the fields of Hindu-Christian studies, Indian Christianity (or, more broadly, World Christianities), or Anthropology of Christianity will have found that the ethnographic particularities of past and present-day life at STA add an interesting dimension to existing understandings of Hindu-Christian relations, Christian missiology in India, and Indian Christianity. Indeed, as demonstrated by Chapters 2 and 3, Jones was both influenced by, but also distinct from, the missionaries who came before him—and even those who came after him with explicit models of inculturation. Through situating STA not only within its varying political and historical milieus, but also through contextualising Christian ashrams within other expressions of Indian Christianity—the long-established communities of Syrian Christians and, more recently, the movements of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity—this thesis has bridged the gap between different ways of focusing on Indian Christianity and its relationship with Hindu milieus. Considered alongside recent ethnographic studies of Indian Christianity—those by Chad Bauman, Kerry San Chirico, Darren Todd Duerksen, and Nathaniel Roberts—

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<sup>1</sup> Swamy, *Reconciliation: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2019*; Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*; Robbins, "Anthropology and Theology: On Transformative Dialogue and Its Limits."



this study of STA addresses a rather particular flavour of Indian Christianity and of Hindu-Christian relations, and thus adds unique ethnographic data to these fields.

(2) The ways that this research has been approached from an interstitial position between the two disciplines of Cultural Anthropology and (Christian) Theology is likely to be of significant interest to those scholars who actively participate in, or are intrigued by, the emergent conversations between these two disciplines. As Chapter One explored in substantial detail, the (Protestant) theological emphasis often placed upon religious belief can, in fact, be of central importance to the anthropologist as she formulates and conducts her ethnographic research. This thesis not only demonstrated the extent to which a researcher's religious beliefs can be formative in shaping her access to ethnographic data, but it also demonstrated the extent to which the alleged binaries of *belief* and *doubt* can, in fact, work together to shape the ways that a researcher is understood by her informants whilst in the field. In this vein, through honestly sharing one's beliefs—as well as one's doubts—a researcher can sometimes establish oneself as a co-seeker of spirituality, and thus be *invited* in to observe, or otherwise learn about, certain aspects of their informants' life-worlds.

(3) Whether or not the reader situates himself or herself within one or more of the particular academic fields of scholarship outlined above, all readers are—to some extent and in some way—embedded in the processes of interacting with Others, and formulating understandings of the Self in relationship to one's own Otherness. Through the detailed, nuanced explorations in this work, we are not only invited to learn more about the dynamics of Self and Other that unravel at our fieldsite of STA, but we can be prompted to reflect on our own circumstances and narratives, and, in doing so, we can grapple with the ways that *we* experience and navigate belonging.

## 6.2. IDEALS AS FUNCTIONAL DIRECTIONAL MARKERS

Here, in the final pages, I want to return specifically to the ways that, in his “Ashram Ideals,” Jones idealised STA as an inviting locale without any prohibitive boundaries. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when Jones's universalist ideals were implanted into the rough and rocky terrain of the real world, various conceptual and structural borders—related to caste, creeds, and individual convictions—gradually emerged, impeding his vision of forming a “miniature Kingdom of God” in which individuals' religious backgrounds and chosen practices would not impede their efforts to establish a spiritual community with each other. The ethnographic material that I have engaged with throughout this thesis has vividly depicted some of the

difficulties that arose in the midst of these dense negotiations between religious idealisation and concrete sociohistorical circumstance, but, I hope, in highlighting and exploring these lived out realities, the importance of the original ideals themselves has not been overlooked or dismissed. Far from meriting dismissal, ideals—including ideals unrealised in fact or even unrealisable in principle—can function as helpful compass points or directional markers inasmuch as they bring us ever closer towards the objective we wish to reach.

I sometimes think of ideals, if I can turn to an analogy, like an individual facing the sun and consciously choosing to walk in its direction. Of course, we will never reach it, and we will sometimes have to turn away from it out of necessity. Of course—to use an image from a Wendell Berry poem—we are sometimes blinded by the very light we seek.<sup>2</sup> And of course, sometimes the sun itself will (or, rather, will *seem to*) set—whether we walk calmly or run frantically toward it. We will not reach it; that’s fine—and it would be naïve to assume that we could. But, if what we are seeking is illumination and enlightenment, a posture which faces in the direction of the sun is better than one which does not. In other words, perhaps the navigations of existential, structural, and social tensions and difficulties that occur in the real-world of STA—compared to the somewhat *idealised* world envisioned by Jones—are themselves worthy endeavours; for they are the ongoing processes and products of a community that has faced the sun and is attempting to walk in its direction.

Our explorations of STA, and the contexts which preceded and continue to influence it, have demonstrated that, in the processes of striving to become (or participate in) a community comprised of differently-minded individuals, we end up learning not only about the “other” but also, and at the same time, more about our own selves. As anthropological literature frequently reminds us, self-understanding and other-constitution are dialectically entangled through complex feedback loops. This dialectic seems, to me, to result somewhat naturally from holding a posture of strong conviction in one’s own beliefs and worldviews while at the same time striving to remain conceptually and existentially open to those who believe and act differently—not unlike a comparative theologian who views religious others as dialogical partners from whom one can learn deeply. Temporarily occupying the interstitial spaces between clearly-marked religious traditions, comparative theologians thus allow themselves, and their own religious views, to be addressed, interrupted, and surprised by the new insights contained within and offered by contrasting—and even conflicting—religious worldviews.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Berry, *Given*, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Clooney, “Francis Xavier, and the World/s We (Don’t Quite) Share,” 178.

One's own views are thus loosely, but confidently, held, allowing space for others' religious ideas and insights to enter in and envelope one's own religious lifeworld, sometimes delicately reconfiguring and reshaping one's religious view itself and other times giving new life to religious muscles that may have atrophied. In navigating such self-other relationships, we are forced to grapple with "the relationship between commitment and openness."<sup>4</sup> In doing so, we can better understand which values we are not willing to compromise on, which types of religious belief or practice we find interesting and worthwhile, and which worldviews we are either disinterested in or even made uneasy by.

### 6.3. SELF-OTHER DYNAMICS

Keeping in mind these processes of *interpersonal* grappling that occur when navigating the relationships between self and other, we can recapitulate the various self-other dynamics that this thesis has explored. We investigated, in Chapter 1, the relational dynamic that I proposed between the disciplines of anthropology and theology, and suggested that the historically secular discipline of anthropology could benefit from actively *inviting* its researchers to intentionally adopt a posture of BIR while conducting their ethnographic research amongst religious communities where "belief" is particularly important. In doing so, we also considered the self-other dynamic that unfolds in the ethnographic encounters of researcher and informant. What would it look like to conceptually open up more disciplinary space for researchers who want to actively reside in the in-between of these two currently distinct disciplines of anthropology and theology; and how might this interstitial location of the researchers affect the relational encounters that occur on the fieldsites? In Chapter 2, after highlighting the longstanding reputation that Christianity has had in some Indian circles as a religion of "foreigners," we explored some of the missiological and ecclesiological shifts towards permitting and actively encouraging inculturated forms of Christianity; thus, the previously foreign-looking Christianity began to consciously incorporate Indian cultural idioms, thereby *inviting* the Hindu socioreligious other into its midst.

Chapter 3 moved away from the macro trends in Indian sociopolitical histories and focused close-up on the particular microcosmic fieldsite of STA: we saw some of the various practical measures that Jones implemented in his attempts to *invite* (Brahmin) Hindus into STA's spiritual environment after establishing the ashram in 1930. This Brahmanical and Advaita-inflected notion of "Hinduness" that Jones held, however, would be later challenged

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<sup>4</sup> Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus*, 156.

by the increasing presence of Hindu converts whose life-worlds did not resonate with those of the Brahmins envisioned by him: Chapter 4—along with its overview of some key features of Dalit theologies—demonstrated some of the various ways that the presence of the SoE students from 1991 onwards was a significant “rupture” from what Jones had envisioned. In *inviting* Indianness into its Christian ashram, STA has had to continuously (re)consider questions such as: “Precisely *whose* Indianness would it attempt to weave into the social fabrics of STA?”, and “What are the boundary lines that could demarcate one practice or belief as helpful and desirable for Christian living while other features of Indian identity are to be deemed spiritually or socially unnecessary?” And, finally, through examining the active contestations and negotiations of belonging that WA has experienced during their times at STA from 2003 onwards, Chapter 5 highlighted some of the challenges that arise when *inviting* a group which is explicitly other-than-Christian. How, then, is belonging negotiated in the midst of different ways of being and believing? Each of these self-other relationships involved, at times, intricate and intense navigations and negotiations from all parties involved.

But, we have not yet finished our inventory of self-other relationships explored here. There was, as the reader may recall, another *invitation* given in the Introduction (Section 0.4.3) which we can reiterate here: one made from me, the writer, to you, the reader. We—you and I—have been navigating this hermeneutic self-other relationship since the moment I started writing and, much later, since you started reading my words. For my part, I have tried to anticipate your responses to my words, and I consequently have added or deleted references to analytical theories, anthropological or theological works, thought-provoking tangential information, and snippets of ethnographic description. In fact, it was through this process—all the while *me* keeping *you* in mind—that I have learned anything at all. And, for your part, you have chosen to open this thesis and patiently read my words; even as I approach the absolute maximum of my word-count, you are still reading. (*Thank you, for that.*)

In some ways, I may seem to have held a position of authority and power over you. I have taken you on a tour of specific historical and sociopolitical contexts that *I* deemed important (*did you enjoy learning about Christianity in colonial India? or about the developments of “Hindutva”?*); and also, when confronted with the over-abundance of ethnographic material from my fieldwork, I have selectively incorporated particular quotations and vignettes, and I reluctantly tossed others aside (*you never even had the chance to learn about some of my favourite moments of the SoE!*). I could have sent you down several other—I think, fascinating—rabbit holes had it not been for this pesky word-limit to which I must adhere. And you, dutifully, would have trudged through the various narratives, subplots, and

settings, until reaching the point when I would have finally laid down my proverbial pen. However, we can recall, à la Foucault, that power is not uni-directional or one-dimensional: you also hold various powers over me. You can abruptly close the thesis, or roll your eyes heavenward, or flunk me in my Viva, or demand certain improvements from me, or portray me in a bad light to my colleagues (“*the nerve of some PhD students these days! She even tried to justify her foolishness by invoking Foucault!*”). But the inescapable reality is that we have already met each other, in some—albeit veiled—form, in this thesis.

Still, here we are. I wonder, as we navigate our self-other relationships through the intrinsic limitations of a PhD thesis, whether we will both allow ourselves to be seen, addressed, interrupted, and pleasantly surprised by what is on offer—perhaps even to mutually change each other in ways that we both deem to be positively transformative; it is often in these dense encounters between reader and writer that meaning arises.

Or maybe we will load our argumentative guns and rapidly fire away. It is a risky business, this inviting the other.

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# APPENDIX 1:

## KEY HINDI TERMS AND THEIR ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

*Ashram* – Etymologically “no-work.” Comparable to a hermitage, a monastic community, or a place for spiritual retreat

*Bagri* – an Indian dialect which draws upon the languages of Rajasthani, Punjabi, and Haryanvi; the mother-tongue of the students from Rajasthan who participated in the SoE

*Bimari* – illness and sickness

*Changayi* – healing

*Dhyan* – profound meditation

*Gyan [Jnana]* – knowledge

*Jai Masih ki* – an exclamation: “Victory and praise is due to Jesus the Messiah!”

*Mukti* – salvation

*Pareshani* – troubles, ailments, diseases, difficulties, disturbances

*Parmeshwar* – the God of the Universe

*Pita Parmeshwar* – Heavenly Father

*Shanti* – Peace

*Shramdaan* – work which is freely given in the spirit of generosity

*Viswas* – faith

## APPENDIX 2:

### SOCIAL MAPPING

#### Overview of Leadership at STA:

At any given point, STA has several individuals who form its leadership. Even the role of “Acharya” (spiritual leader) is divided into three different roles: Chief Acharya, Residential Acharya, and Deputy Acharya—all of which have slightly different, complementary responsibilities—who work in synchronisation to provide STA with spiritual leadership and direction. The Acharyas focus both on the “big picture” (e.g. by choosing the thematic topics for the ashram’s programmes) and on the small details of spiritual life at STA (e.g. they meet individually with ashramites to offer spiritual guidance, and they sometimes make an effort to continue this spiritual mentorship even after the ashramites have left STA.)

Leadership at STA is also comprised of the Manager (who runs the logistical operations at STA and approves visiting groups), the Hostess (who is the primary contact for visiting ashramites and visiting groups and who ensures that individuals have a smooth experience at STA), and the STA board. The STA board has several individuals on it, generally including the Acharyas and the Manager, and there are also Secretarial and Treasurer roles, along with other positions. For over a decade, the Indian Government has restricted foreign nationals from serving on the board. As such, since that time, STA’s board has been comprised solely of Indian nationals.

#### Names and titles/affiliations<sup>1</sup>

Acharya E. Stanley Jones – former Chief Acharya (deceased)

Acharya James Mathews – former Chief Acharya and son-in-law of E. Stanley Jones (deceased)

Acharya D.P. Titus – former Resident Acharya (deceased)

Acharya R.S. Verma – former Resident Acharya and founder of the SoE programme

Acharya John Biswas – former Resident Acharya

Acharya Joseph Ghosh – current Resident Acharya; former Deputy Acharya

Ms. Lillian Wallace (“Lillian”) – former Manager of STA

Mr. Roy – former Manager of STA (deceased)

Mr. Vijay Patni (“Vijay”) – current Manager of STA

Ms. Eileen Richards (“Auntie Eileen”) – former Hostess of STA

Uncle William – long-time ashramite of STA; participant of the Winter ashram programme

Mr. Stanley Das – Teacher of the SoE

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<sup>1</sup> Names are provided for those individuals whom we encounter multiple times throughout this thesis, and whose role and affiliation will be useful for the reader to keep in mind.

Uncle Pratyush – student participant of the SoE

Uncle Rahul – student participant of the SoE

Suhasini - student participant of the SoE (wife of Anil)

Anil - student participant of the SoE (husband of Suhasini)

Shreya – student participant of the SoE

Vihaan – student participant of the SoE

Dana – one of the founders and spiritual teachers of World Amrita

Emilia – one of the managers of World Amrita